



The legend of Leonard Fournette

BY WRIGHT THOMPSON



Special Report
Why coming out in the
post-acceptance era
is tougher than ever

FEATURING

GUS KENWORTHY

DERRICK GORDON

CHRIS MOSIER

MEGAN RAPINOE

A young man and woman are shown in profile, looking down at a book held by the woman. The man is smiling and looking at the book, while the woman is also smiling and looking at the book. They are both wearing casual clothing. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

3:00 p.m.

I knew I had someone
in my corner.



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FORWARD

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"I want to be the guy who comes out, wins s--- and is like, I'm taking names."



Life in Secret

Senior writer Alyssa Roenigk on Gus Kenworthy's decision to publicly come out: "An editor once told me every story should change you. That goes for the writer and the reader. Over the past two months, I've flown to interviews and written in my apartment without being able to share with even my closest friends what I was working on. In doing so, I was granted a glimpse of the loneliness and frustration of living a secret life. I thought I knew the power of words; I don't believe I truly understood how deeply they hurt. Sticks and stones have nothing on the casual misuse of the word 'gay.' Before I started working on this story, I thought Gus Kenworthy had it all. Today, I'm certain he has all that matters."

MORE ON PAGE 60

Gus Kenworthy shows off his Olympic mettle.

Staff writer Christina Kahrl on the future of out athletes



"It wasn't even a decade ago when I was asking Dave Kopay if it was going to be another 20 years before we'd see an out, active athlete in the NFL. But with a generation of young Americans

increasingly ready to come out long before they're ever a national story on the field, we're approaching a future where coming out might be utterly irrelevant. It's a fascinating moment in time, a reflection of differing generational sensibilities, while inviting all of us to a better future where coming-out stories will just be incidental to sports stories." MORE ON PAGE 47

Senior writer Pablo S. Torre on Derrick Gordon's perspective



"Halfway through dinner with Gordon at a TGI Fridays in his hometown, I felt goose bumps. I'd wondered how talkative the first openly gay player in men's Division I basketball would be, a

year after coming out. What I found was an athlete searingly honest about being out, so much so that a supermajority of our conversation revolved around the magnitude of that honesty and his happiness therein. Weeks later the tenor of our conversations turned. As the story about what it means to be out in sports changed, I'd get goose bumps for a very different reason." MORE ON PAGE 50

Senior writer Wright Thompson on Leonard Fournette's legend

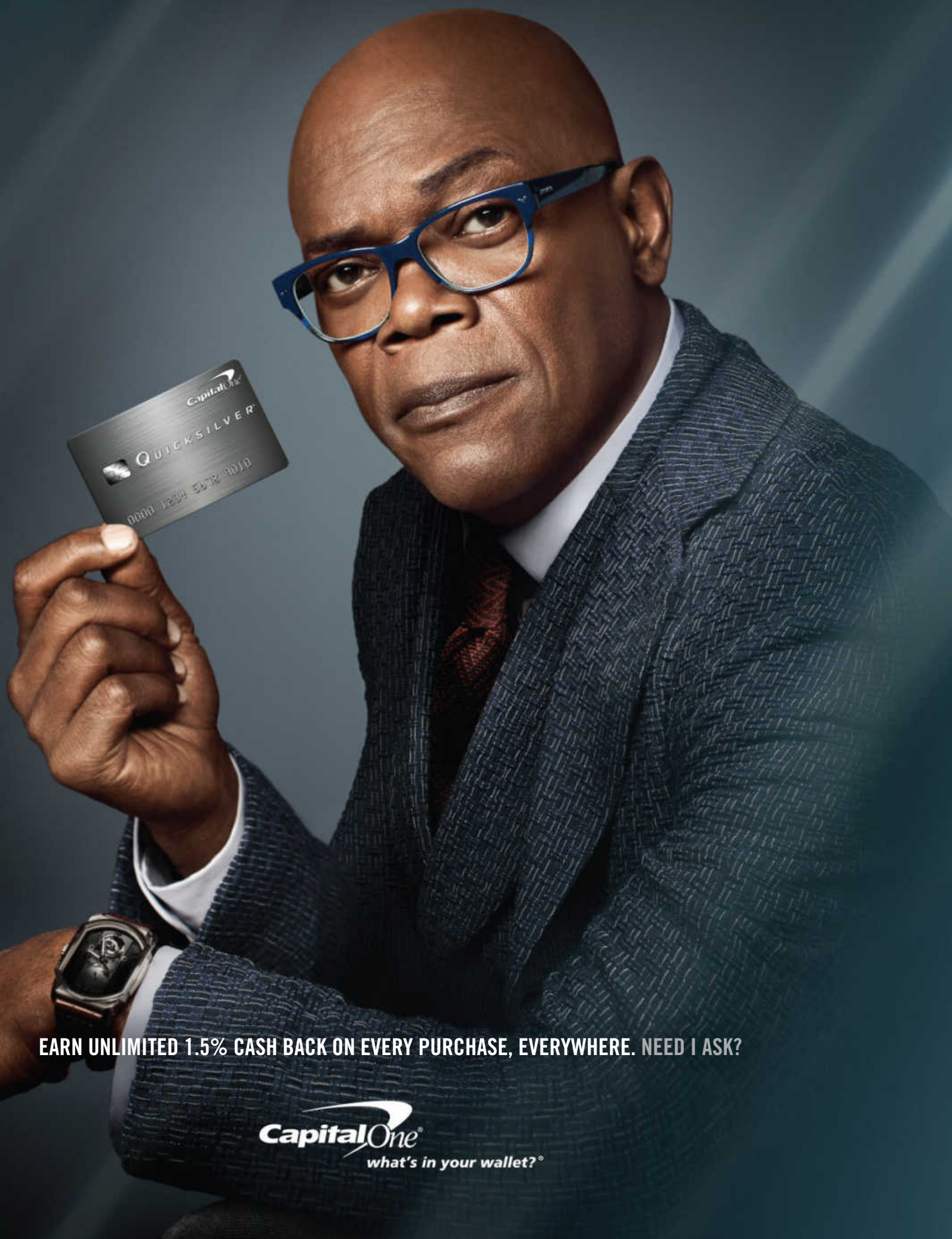


"The story really became about the myth being created around Fournette and how it'll be an unshakable part of his life for decades. Attempting to see into the future, I went looking for

LSU's only Heisman winner, Billy Cannon. That's when I heard the songs. New Orleans rappers Jay Jones and Hollygrove Keem recorded 'Leonard Fournette.' It's on YouTube. I played it for Cannon's daughter, who told me that rockabilly legend Jay Chevalier had made one about her dad. It's on YouTube too. They're eerily similar. Sports fame hasn't changed all that much." MORE ON PAGE 13

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Keeping Heyward safe in St. Louis is vital for the Cards' 2016 hopes.

What's Next for the Postseason Also-rans?

ESPN Insider Jim Bowden lists the key moves these four teams must make in the offseason to gear up for a 2016 World Series run.

St. Louis Cardinals

RE-SIGN JASON HEYWARD

Heyward will enter free agency as the best defensive right fielder in MLB, and his offensive WAR has improved the past two seasons (3.7 to 6.2 to 6.5). With perhaps Heyward's best yet to come, the Cards should do their best to re-sign the 26-year-old, but they can also just have their young outfielders—Stephen Piscotty, Tommy Pham and Randal Grichuk—take his place at non-arbitration-eligible salaries.

Houston Astros

RESTRUCTURE THE BULLPEN

The Astros arrived a year ahead of schedule, winning 86 games in 2015, but their bullpen faded down the stretch (3.27 regular-season ERA) and almost cost the team a postseason berth. Look for the Astros to be aggressive in improving the back end of the pen, and that includes a possible trade for a proven closer such as Craig Kimbrel (39 saves, fourth most in the NL) or Aroldis Chapman (33 saves).

Texas Rangers

REHAB YU DARVISH SLOWLY

Darvish has not had any setbacks since undergoing Tommy John surgery on March 17, and it looks as if he'll be able to return to the rotation in the first three months of the season. But here's where the Rangers need to be careful: They just won the AL West without Darvish. They need to be patient and not rush him back. Once he returns to form, he and Cole Hamels will form a one-two punch for years.

LA Dodgers

REPLACE ZACK GREINKE

The righty Cy Young Award candidate has three years and \$77 million left on his contract, but he also has an opt-out clause that he'll very likely exercise. Plenty of teams—such as the Cubs, Giants, Red Sox and Tigers—are in position to make offers. The Dodgers lack pitching depth, so if they lose out on Greinke, expect them to aggressively pursue Jordan Zimmermann or David Price, or both, in free agency.

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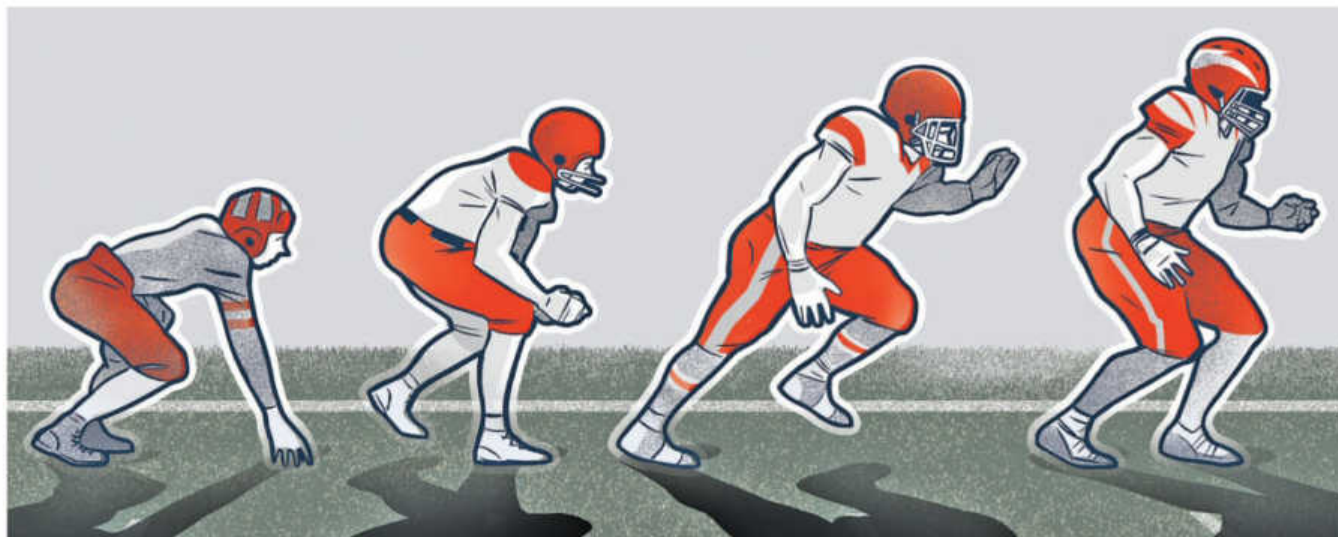
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THE NUMBERS



BY
PETER
KEATING



Hogs Wild Offensive linemen aren't as mean and physical as they used to be, but in today's wide-open NFL, does it really matter?



I am sure you have heard the reports, from analysts of all stripes: Offensive line play in pro football is atrocious. Hall of Fame GM Bill Polian, now an ESPN analyst, says the NFL's shortage of good linemen is an epidemic. And everything from too much zone blocking in college to too little practice in training camp is to blame.

I admit I spend Sundays worrying that something awful will happen to Eli Manning because of Marshall Newhouse. But I have a question: If offensive lines are so terrible, why are teams scoring 23.3 points per game (through Week 6), the third-highest average in history? Perhaps because focusing on 320-pound blockers obscures our view of the field.

Yes, several aspects of offensive linesmanship have deteriorated. O-linemen commit more penalties now: False starts, holding or offsides have occurred on 16 percent more snaps this season than last, according to data from ESPN Stats & Information. Offensive lines clear less room for runners: Leaguewide, average rushing yards before first contact has declined in each of the past three seasons, and it's now 2.45 yards per carry, the lowest mark for which Stats & Info has data. O-lines allow more pressure too: Quarterbacks have been sacked, hit or hassled on 25.1 percent of dropbacks this year, a number that's jumped by about 3 percentage points since 2012.

But I'd worry a lot more about all of this if my club couldn't move the ball. Instead, NFL quarterbacks are playing at a historic level. They're completing a whopping 63.9 percent of their passes this season, a figure that almost no team in the league could have touched 15 years ago. They are also more productive than ever, throwing for 7.32 yards per attempt, the most since the 1966 AFL-NFL merger. And they are avoiding risk, passing for 1.77 touchdowns per interception, the second-highest ratio in NFL history.

All of these trends seem driven by the same phenomenon: pass-happy college teams. Spread formations and split-wide tight ends, the pistol and the shotgun—they're all on the rise and are producing a generation of offensive linemen who move backward on passes and sideways on rushes rather than shoving scrums forward. If that means some facets of line play have crumbled, it also means teams have altered their approach, because these college innovations continue to pollinate the NFL, and for a good reason: They work! Teams have discovered that passing constantly, to different targets at

different depths, is the best way to put points on the board. And there's really no going back. Colleges aren't turning out many pile drivers like Walter Jones anymore, and guess what: They aren't turning out many black-and-white-TV repairmen either.

There are many ways for NFL clubs to go wrong in this new era. Drafting linemen in quantity, hoping that some will stick, is a crapshoot. On the other hand, spending little payroll on the O-line (as Indy did this offseason) or tilting too far toward college-style plays (as Washington did with Robert Griffin III) is a surefire way to get quarterbacks hurt. Seattle has tried something different, converting defensive players who are size/speed freaks, such as J.R. Sweezy and Kristjan Sokoli, to the other side of the line. That's creative, but the Seahawks' inexperienced linemen, although superior athletes, haven't played too well this season.

The smartest organizations are asking their quarterbacks to throw more often but also more quickly, to take advantage of new schemes while compensating for fledgling linemen. Look at Manning: Early in his career, Eli worked behind a terrific line and took plenty of time to let deep patterns develop. As late as 2012, he spent 2 seconds or less in the pocket on just 25.9 percent of dropbacks, the sixth-lowest rate in the NFL. As the Giants began to rebuild the unit in front of Manning in 2013, they asked him to remake himself into a quick-release quarterback. He complied: That dropback proportion has jumped to nearly 50 percent, fifth highest in the NFL. Likewise, Andy Dalton and Philip Rivers are both seeing less pressure than three years ago because they have boosted their percentage of quick throws, and they are enjoying banner seasons.

So why complain about how offensive linemen have changed? Like life, the NFL rewards adaptability.



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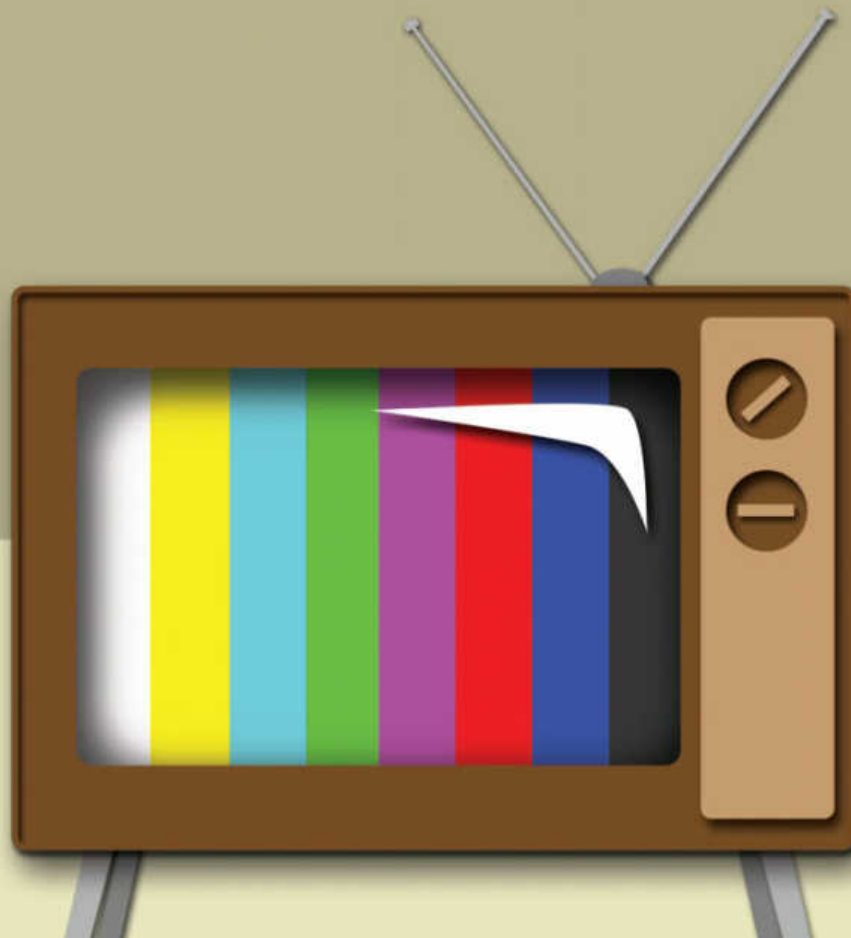
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The Young Man, the Myth, the Legend

LSU running back Leonard Fournette is making history, but what will history make of him?

BY WRIGHT THOMPSON



His teammates leave through the locker room doors at the north end of Tiger Stadium, but Leonard Fournette waits for a state trooper and a campus police officer to escort him out alone. His sudden fame is always separating him from someone or something, one of the casualties of the mania that has settled over Baton Rouge. A crowd has gathered, wanting an autograph, a picture, a touch, and if he exits with the rest of the Tigers, he might not get home for hours.



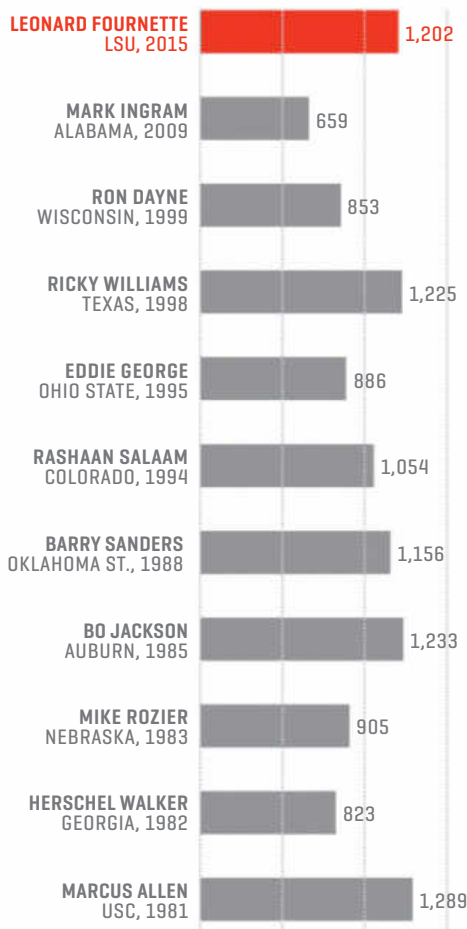
Through Week 7, Fournette's streak of rushing for at least 150 yards and a TD in six straight games was the longest in the FBS since UCF's Kevin Smith went seven in a row in 2007.

The trooper goes first, a bull of a man named Bryan Madden, all biceps and pecs, himself an offensive lineman for LSU 23 years ago. His day job is working the security detail for Gov. Bobby Jindal's family. Everything from his shaved head to his holstered Glock says: Try me. They walk out through the tunnel, in the opposite direction of Fournette's departing teammates. An hour after the South Carolina game, the stadium bowl is empty. Fournette looks around, commenting about the strangeness of seeing the place so quiet.

OFF AND RUNNING

Can Fournette become LSU's first Heisman winner in 56 years? His historic six-game start bodes awfully well for a trip to the Big Apple.

FOURNETTE'S RUSHING YARDS THROUGH FIRST SIX GAMES VS. PAST 10 HEISMAN-WINNING RBs*



*USC's Reggie Bush, whose Heisman win was vacated in 2010, had 761 yards in 2005.

It seems much smaller when the spell is broken.

He makes a quarter turn and heads into a concourse. The only sounds are the metal clap of folding chairs and the voices of concession guys trying to give away the last of the food to co-workers. Madden opens a gate, and Fournette climbs into the front seat of an unmarked police car. As Madden turns on the flashing lights and pulls out past the basketball arena, Fournette scrolls through the women mentioning him on Twitter. Blue lights reflect off the campus

buildings. Through the tinted windows, he sees a student he knows walking home in the dark. The student can't see him. Madden heads up the hill toward the old athletic dorm, where he lived as a player.

"You never been in Broussard Hall?" he asks.

"Nah," Fournette says, clearly pleased both to have avoided that simpler past and to crack on Madden about it.

"I should sue for hazard pay," Madden says.

"Times change, huh," Fournette says, almost giggling. He's got a great laugh, a wide, easy smile, which is the same at a news conference as it is alone with his parents. He hasn't been separated from that. Madden tells Fournette stories about the old days, about an infamous Broussard Hall fight that started between Shaquille O'Neal and a defensive back but ended up with basketball coach Dale Brown and football coach Curly Hallman almost coming to blows. Madden saw it, but since this happened before modern sports fame turned college stars into a kind of public property, the brawl never made headlines. "No Twitter," Madden says, and though it's dark in the car, his voice sounds like he is smirking. "It's just a rumor now."

He wheels back behind Fournette's apartment building, where the sophomore gets out and walks upstairs to meet his family. There's a party going on, with Popeyes chicken and his mom's fried rice, both pork and shrimp. The next morning, he drives from Baton Rouge along I-12 to Slidell to have lunch. His mom, Lory, and two sisters join him at a suburban chain rotisserie place. It's relaxing and easy. Nobody bothers them during the meal, at least not until the Fournettes get ready to leave. People start cheering, calling Leonard's name, chanting. At first his mom thinks something is wrong, and then she realizes. A restaurant is giving her son a standing ovation as he heads toward the door.

TWO DAYS LATER, Lory Fournette sits in her living room and tries to make sense of her son's football season. It's been a strange fall.

On Sept. 12, when LSU opened, the Fournettes were parents of a well-known running back. By mid-October, they were witnesses to a living myth, which neither they nor Leonard can fully comprehend or control. He'd just passed 1,000 yards faster than Bo Jackson and Herschel Walker ever did, and this coming Saturday, he'll literally punch a would-be Florida tackler off him with his free hand. Not only does he gain a record number of yards, he gains them with an

almost cartoonish brutality. He is becoming a football folk hero, like Bo or Herschel, Joe Namath or LSU's only Heisman Trophy winner, Billy Cannon.

No matter what happens in the rest of Leonard Fournette's life, he'll struggle to escape the wake of this season, and if his career peaks at the Heisman ceremony, he'll be forever shadowed by the avatar of who he used to be. A few years ago, Cannon was spotted by a younger LSU fan who couldn't possibly have seen him play, and the fan stammered and gushed and finally asked, "Are you Billy Cannon?"

Now an old man, Cannon smiled and said, "I'm what's left of him."

Lory says she doesn't worry much, not even about injury, quoting Proverbs 18 as an explanation: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." What kind of God would give a boy the ability to be the best at something and then not allow that talent to find its fullest expression? She has faith.

Two things do scare her, she finally admits.

As a child, Leonard stuttered. She knew his dreams, so she would stand him in front of a mirror and make him address an imaginary audience. "If you're gonna be an NFL player," she told him, "you're gonna have to learn how to speak." He faced the mirror and practiced, and even though he long ago stopped stuttering, she worries sometimes. He's just on TV so much. It makes her proud to see him act the same in an interview as he does at home.

"Don't ever let anybody take that from you," she tells him all the time.

She worries about Leonard feeling lonely too, so she calls three or four times a day, keeping a line open, maybe passing along a Bible verse. "To let him know," she says. "Sometimes when you're in the limelight you can really feel alone. Even though you have all these people around, you can really feel like everything is closing in on you. No matter what's going on, he can always call us."

It's all she can do now; watch, offer a few words of support, make sure he's got something comfortable and familiar when he gets home from a game. In a few days, she'll head over to Baton Rouge with pans of her son's favorite foods. They tailgate at his apartment this season, just a block from campus. It's easier that way. The family famously endured Katrina on an I-10 overpass, but that memory isn't as powerful a force as the way Leonard's life has changed this season, and the speed with which that change has come. All his life, he has stood out on

whatever team he joined, but this is different: He is leaving the promise behind and stepping into whatever comes next.

He's always been full of potential. When people looked at him as a young man, they imagined what he might become. The living room around Lory is a testament to that potential. Every star athlete's childhood home is basically the same, the ones who grow up to drive trucks and those who end up in the NFL. Awards cover every flat surface, from the Touchdown Club of Atlanta, from a playground in New Orleans.

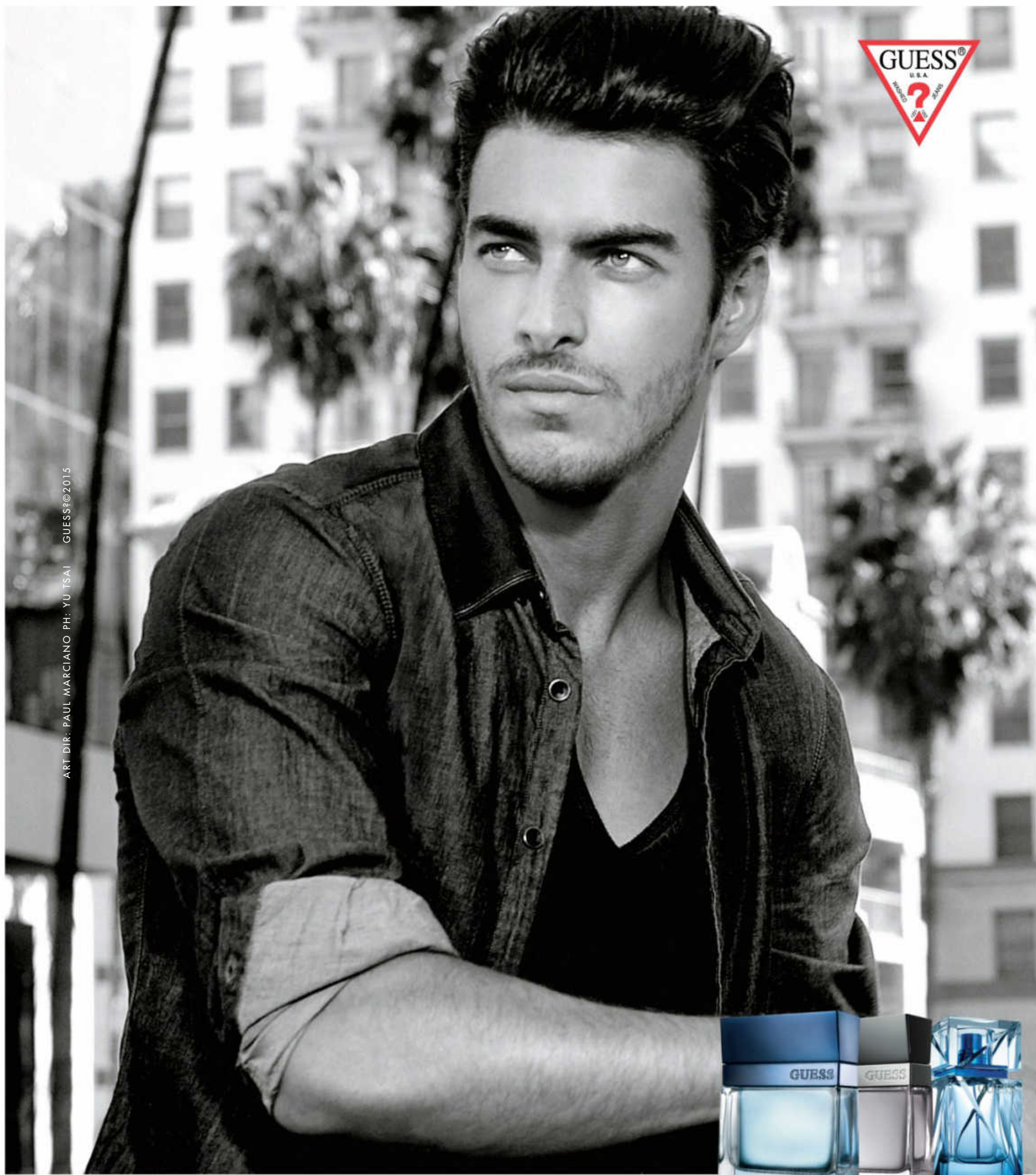
Leonard's mom has magazine covers and plaques from the SEC on the floor, long ago running out of places to put them all. Some look slick and professional; others are flimsy and

tarnished. Only later will meaning be assigned, the trophies serving as either proof or taunt. Against South Carolina, Fournette became just the 10th running back in college football history to gain 1,000 yards in five games. Only three of the other nine remain household names, each a Heisman winner, and while Ricky Williams flamed out, Barry Sanders and Marcus Allen are in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The rest have faded from memory.

AT THE CENTER of the madness, Fournette is having the time of his life. He doesn't seem stressed or overwhelmed. Everything is new and exciting, the brief window when fame is a joy and not a burden. There's a New Orleans



Mom Lory (top) and Miles do their best to shield Fournette from unrealistic expectations.



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rap song named after him, recorded on the ultracool label 0017th—"Fourth down, Les Miles, let's go for it ... Leonard Fournette"—and he was recently on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* being compared to the greatest running backs who ever lived. Tom Cruise came to see him play. A sign at Tiger Stadium read THE BOOGEYMAN CHECKS UNDER HIS BED FOR LEONARD FOURNETTE. He's good with all of it.

It's the Monday after the South Carolina game. Relaxed and calm in the lounge across the hall from Coach Miles' office, Fournette smiles when former LSU star and Pro Bowl safety Ryan Clark stops by to say hello. Just a moment ago, it seems, he was playing ball in a park with his friends. "I was in seventh grade, and I'm 20 now," he says, sounding a little stunned. "Time doesn't wait for anybody."

Fournette wants to do things right. During news conferences, he'll look over at the media relations guy for help if he's unsure. This summer, he went through rigorous media training, sitting for mock interviews in which the questioners aggressively hammered away on his perceived arrogance. They got pretty rough with him, says LSU business school professor Tommy Karam, who runs the sessions, rougher than any actual reporter will get. Once, when he saw Fournette mumble and blow past two visiting trainers in the LSU weight room, Karam confronted him and told a fib: Those were Heisman voters, he said, and everyone is always watching you. Fournette never did it again. A few weeks ago after a game, he won a weekly MVP award, which he then gave to fullback J.D. Moore, who Fournette said deserved it more. Miles says it was the first time in his entire coaching career he'd ever seen that happen. One local radio guy called it a "blessing" to cover someone who always does the right thing, which is how the trouble always begins. Leonard Fournette has some weakness or skeleton that hasn't yet become public—"There is always something," the fictional governor of Louisiana said in *All the King's Men*—and when he fails, he'll be held to a standard he didn't create and couldn't have prevented. There's no media training for that, beyond duck and cover.

Risk is everywhere.

Three days earlier, Fournette's Georgia rival, fellow sophomore Nick Chubb, tore up his knee, ending his season. Their boyhood homes likely look the same, trophies piled up around the living room, and they'd both been on the same trajectory. Chubb's mother surely trusted that God would protect her son and his talent too. Now

ALL BETS ARE ON

Prop bettors, rejoice: The decadeslong ban on Heisman wagering is over! But the window closes on Nov. 15, so we sized up late-season action for the top five Heisman hopefuls. Forewarned is forearmed. —PHIL STEELE

LEONARD FOURNETTE | LSU RB



ODDS: 1-2

11/21 AT OLE MISS

The Rebels rack up TFLs (58, No. 6 in the FBS) but have proved suspect to strong run games. See: Bama's 215 rush yards in Week 3. Fournette ran for 113 yards against the Rebs in 2014, and expect even bigger returns from him here.

11/28 VS. TEXAS A&M

The Aggies are built for speed, but LSU's hulking O-line (starting five average 6-6, 313) plus Fournette's powerful style (458 yac, No. 2 in the FBS) will give them fits. Anything less than 100 yards for the bell cow would hurt his Heisman campaign.

SETH RUSSELL | BAYLOR QB



ODDS: 5-1

11/21 AT OKLAHOMA STATE

Baylor was stymied 49-17 on its last trip to Stillwater in '13, a loss that knocked Bears QB Bryce Petty out of the Heisman race. Russell tops the nation in QBR [88.9] but must be on high alert: He'll face the nation's No. 2 pass rush [25 sacks].

11/27 AT TCU

Without star CB Ranthony Texada, TCU has allowed 12.6 ypc (No. 89 in the FBS) but should improve under Gary Patterson. Still, Russell won't need to outpace TCU's Trevone Boykin, just beat his team, to remain the Heisman's best QB hope.

TREVONE BOYKIN | TCU QB



ODDS: 6-1

11/21 AT OKLAHOMA

Boykin's got wheels (five games with 50-plus rush yards), and he'll need them against one of my top 10 pass D's in the nation. OU has 21 sacks (T10 in the FBS) and is allowing QBs to complete just 48.3 percent of their throws [No. 7].

11/27 VS. BAYLOR

With Boykin and Russell both primed to put up big numbers, the Heisman hinges more on a W than raw stats. And to beat Baylor, Boykin must exploit a disappointing D-line (12 sacks in '15) but avoid the still dangerous Shawn Oakman.

EZEKIEL ELLIOTT | OHIO STATE RB



ODDS: 16-1

11/21 VS. MICHIGAN STATE

In '14, Elliott ran for 154 yards vs. a Spartans D that had been allowing 95.4 rush ypg. Without LB Ed Davis, MSU's run D has dipped in '15, but if OSU hands Sparty its first loss and Elliott tops 200, he can vault the Heisman heap.

11/28 AT MICHIGAN

The best any running back managed vs. Michigan through seven weeks was Utah's Devontae Booker with 69 yards, so surpassing the century mark is no easy task. If Elliott falls short of that target, his run at the Heisman might too.

DERRICK HENRY | ALABAMA RB



ODDS: 16-1

11/21 VS. CHARLESTON SOUTHERN

The good news for Henry: If he's pulled at the half with 100 yards, the pedestrian day won't hurt his Heisman shot. Bad news? Even a 200-yard effort won't impress. This just isn't a needle-moving tilt. D-Day will have come two weeks earlier vs. LSU.

11/28 AT AUBURN

Auburn's a sieve vs. the rush: Three backs topped 100 yards through its first six games. Henry, with 5.9 ypc, should join those ranks. He could also make a run at Bama's single-season rush record [Trent Richardson, 1,679 yards in 2011].

All stats and odds through Week 7. Odds courtesy Station Casinos.



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Chubb is slipping behind, part of the inevitable winnowing. After their games ended, Fournette sent Chubb a message. "I'm praying for you and a speedy recovery," he wrote, then urged the running back to listen to a gospel song that gives Fournette comfort during tough times: Fred Hammond singing Isaiah 54, "No weapon formed against thee shall prosper."

When asked whether he has injury insurance, Fournette refers the question to his mom and dad, saying he doesn't really deal with anything but football. (According to Dennis Dodd of CBSSports.com, the Fournettes have purchased private insurance until next year, when their son becomes draft-eligible and the NCAA-financed insurance kicks in.) Leonard is focused and somehow free of the anxiety all the adults around him feel. That makes sense. He's never truly failed at anything in his life, so of course he expects to succeed. "It's like a dream," Fournette says. "It's happening so fast. It's not slowing down. I try to be cautious with every decision I make. I never thought I'd be one of the headlines of football."

His 10-month-old daughter, Lyric, just started crawling. Fournette says this almost made him cry, which is tough football player code for he wept harder than Lyric at bedtime. The past few months he has taken a lot of pictures so he has something to show her when she grows up. (Lyric lives with her mom.) Her birth wasn't planned, and Lyric's mother, Jamie Jones, was seven months pregnant before Fournette worked up the nerve to tell his parents. "I kept going back and forth," he says. "I'd get on the phone with them and choke. I'd just change the subject. I was terrified."

Taking the baby home from the hospital—*Oh my god, they just let us leave with a tiny human!*—it hit him. He was a father, an adult, and he started thinking about the responsibility and pleasure of buying her first car and paying for school. College football is a childish thing he'll have to put down, and he knows already that he'll miss it. In a year and a half, he will leave this place and begin his life's work. That's why he stood in front of a mirror as a boy and fought through a stutter, so he could go to the NFL and try to be the best there ever was. College is prelude, and while many people around him are counting the days until he turns pro, Fournette is feeling nostalgic for something that isn't even gone yet. He knows that some of the players in the locker room will be his friends for life, the people who stand up at his wedding, yet he also knows that once they leave Baton Rouge behind,

FOURNETTE VS. EVERYONE

No player is within 40 yards of Fournette's 200 rush ypg this season, and his 1,202 rush yards are more than 83 FBS teams.

LEONARD FOURNETTE LSU	200.3
DALVIN COOK FSU	159.2
MATT BREIDA GEORGIA SOUTHERN	145.8
ROYCE FREEMAN OREGON	142.4
EZEKIEL ELLIOTT OHIO STATE	141.1
FBS TEAM AVERAGE	178.5

YARDS PER GAME

664

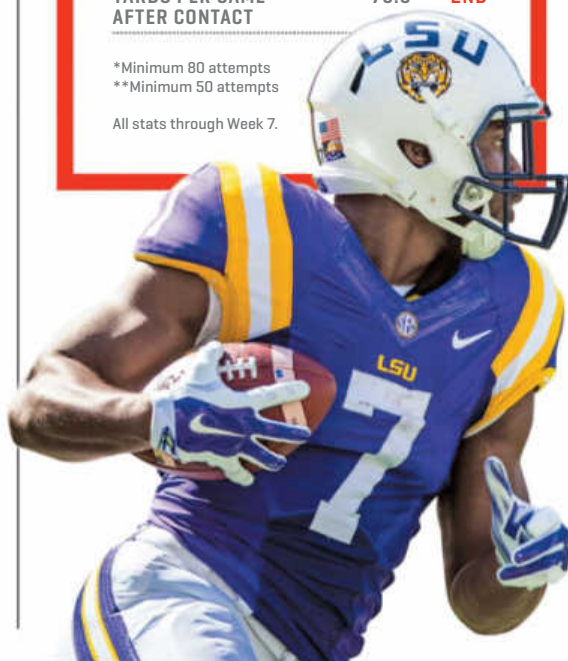
Fournette has gained 664 of his 1,202 yards this season on runs outside the tackles, the most in the FBS.

WHERE FOURNETTE RANKS AMONG 2015 POWER 5 RUNNING BACKS IN ...

POINTS PER GAME	14.0	1ST
YARDS PER CARRY*	8.0	4TH
YARDS FROM SCRIMMAGE	209.7	1ST
% OF SCRIMMAGE YARDS	45.5	1ST
TDs PER RUSH %**	9.3	2ND
YARDS PER GAME AFTER CONTACT	76.3	2ND

*Minimum 80 attempts
**Minimum 50 attempts

All stats through Week 7.



something will be lost forever. Fame separates. He's once in a generation, and his path is taking him somewhere they can't go.

"You're not gonna see them again," he says.

Fournette is 6-foot-1, 230 pounds, but he looks boyish in his braces, which he got as a senior in high school. They're finished straightening his teeth, but he can't find time to have them removed. His schedule is too packed. His mom is always calling to remind him that his car needs an oil change, but he can't find time for that either. Since he'll certainly forgo his senior season, he's taking classes year-round, during all intersessions and summers, on pace to graduate in three years. From seventh grade, he got up at 6 in the morning, made the long ride across the lake to school, then practiced football and made it home for dinner and bed. Then he went to college, where the schedule got busier. The pace has been unrelenting for years and won't let up for many more to come. Who will Fournette be when he finally is able to take stock of the changes that began this fall? Will he be surprised when he looks in a mirror? Right now he's 20 and in full bloom. His team is undefeated. Alabama is next. He's got all he can handle with today to see much further into the future.

AFTER PRACTICING FOR Florida, Miles gets in his Escalade to drive across town. It's always disorienting to hang with him, this *Groundhog Day* effect, because no matter how many years pass, inside the LSU football ops building his life never really changes. Miles did recently stop drinking caffeine, and he went on this crazy fad diet. His secretary ordered him a new couch. His kids are older. He got a new windbreaker. Otherwise, everything is the same, almost down to the minute.

Every Wednesday night for 11 seasons, Miles has done his local radio show, which never changes either, from the boy who brings him a jar of blueberries to the girl who drops off a single yellow rose. The repetition can lull, the routines hiding the fact that even though this year seems to be like the ones that came before, it is very different. Fournette is like no player he has ever coached. Miles feels an almost parental obligation to protect him from the madness, even if he isn't quite sure how to.

He's not even sure Fournette wants protection.

Driving along I-10, passing the sign for a dive bar named Ivar's, Miles channels Fournette's reaction to his restrictions on access and attention: "Really? Are you kidding me? I'm in my 20s, and



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Get Crackin'



Fournette wasn't always comfortable as the center of attention, but his play leaves him no choice.

everyone in the world loves me. And you want me not to communicate with people? Explain that to me.' He just had a big smile on his face: 'OK, Coach.' You could just sense that he was sitting there thinking, 'I'm good with this. This is new.'"

Miles is 61, the veteran of many wars of public opinion, and he knows adoration can quickly become toxic. Once during a radio show commercial break, he pointed to his microphone and said that one day another coach would sit in that chair and the boy would bring that guy the blueberries: The king is dead; long live the king. He wants to keep Fournette from getting too high so the inevitable fall doesn't crush him.

"I explain it to him: 'If it ever gets to a point where this is too much, I'm the bad guy,'" Miles says. "'And I'm good with that. You should be able to go to college and not have all the distractions that are befalling you because of sudden fame.' That will be an issue for him, but he's got the immediate shut-off switch and that's me."

Miles changes lanes, glancing back to make sure he doesn't clip the car he's cutting off, getting ready to exit on Acadian. He loved college, and part of his ability to connect with generations of players is his memory of the years he spent in Ann Arbor. "I think back to me," Miles says. "I lived all of my 20s, and for that matter 30s, in real anonymity. I was a very average player on a great team. I could hide when I wanted to hide. If

"IT'S LIKE A DREAM. IT'S HAPPENING SO FAST. IT'S NOT SLOWING DOWN."

LEONARD FOURNETTE

I wanted to go get a beer, I could get a beer. All the things. I want to make sure he realizes that it's something he can do."

Miles has seen what happens when fame turns, and it always turns. The best he can do is delay the inevitable a bit. Nobody knows what will happen to Fournette after Baton Rouge, or whether he'll even make it through the 20 or so games he's got left without an injury. He might win the Heisman, and he might win it twice. He might go first in the draft and flame out. He might be the greatest running back who ever lived or the subject of a "Where Are They Now?" story in 50 years.

Fournette's high school strength coach made him learn about Marcus Dupree, the highly recruited running back in the '80s who was the subject of a 30 for 30 documentary titled *The Best That Never Was*. Dupree drives a truck now. Nothing is assured, least of all something as intangible as the kind of greatness Fournette wants. That's the tension laced beneath this magical season at LSU, which has seen a young man with potential become a folk song: Everyone is watching the first act of a great drama, and nobody has a clue how it will end.



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INTRODUCING
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The mania around Fournette's season is eerily similar to Billy Cannon's '59 Heisman campaign.

THAT'S NOT EXACTLY true. One man does.

Sixty miles north of Baton Rouge, the Angola Prison dentist sits in the visitors center and museum for his lunch break. His name is Dr. Billy Cannon, 78 now and still seeing patients. Two women in the gift shop smile and flirt with him.

"Thirty years ago," he jokes, and all three laugh.

No one else in Louisiana so fully understands what will happen to Fournette in the coming years and decades, or what he'll find in the mirror when it is all done. Cannon lived it. A forgotten rockabilly sensation once wrote a song about him—"Look out, there he goes ... Billy Cannon"—and *Sports Illustrated* called him "strong as a young bull" and a "model student and citizen." He got a standing ovation in a restaurant too. No LSU Tiger has won the Heisman Trophy since 1959, when then-Vice President Richard Nixon handed Cannon the award. He became a legend, the once-in-a-generation kind, his most famous play a fourth-quarter punt return touchdown through the mist

and fog on a Halloween night. But nobody rises as high as he did without a fall. Even with a successful dental practice, he became obsessed with his real estate holdings and finding the same success in business as he did in football. When the market crashed in the early 1980s, Cannon got involved in a counterfeiting scheme to pay his bills. The feds caught him, and he did three years, losing his reputation, even his self-worth. He disappeared for nearly two decades, working in the prison as a sort of penance, and only recently did he realize that LSU fans forgave him long ago. That helped him forgive himself. Cannon used to be all sharp edges and ego, and now he's a sweet old man who is thankful his ambition didn't cost him more than it did. He survived his own legend. Many do not. "It drifts away," he says. "You're not as impressed with people as you once were, and you don't care if you're impressing anyone else. It happens so gradually, you don't know it's happening."

At an LSU scrimmage, Cannon met Fournette, and when he looked at the hopeful, powerful, confident young man, he saw himself: all of it, the highs and lows, spread out in front of him. He knows exactly what Fournette is feeling, as well as something Fournette won't feel for many, many

years. Cannon has seen what the myth looks like on the other side. Money once consumed him, and now he turns down raises at the prison, passing them along to his staff. He knows not to confuse friends and acquaintances. He knows it's a blessing that his family survived, that his kids love him and bring the grandkids around, and that he and his high school sweetheart are still married, 59 years in November. Dot Cannon waited for him to get out of prison the same way she waited outside the locker room on Saturday nights. Life isn't nearly as simple as it seems when a restaurant gives you a standing ovation.

"He's gonna have temptations and peaks and valleys," Cannon says before walking outside to drive back through the prison gates to his patients, who call him "Legend." He stands beside his F-150 and turns around before opening the door, wanting to make sure Fournette will be treated with kindness. Cannon understands that a story is both a chronicle of hype and an instrument of it.

"Nothing controversial," he says.

"He won't get torn down until later," he's told.

Cannon smiles and nods. He's lived this all before.

"Only if he's built up too high," he says. ■

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Das Sack Machine

The Packers' desperate gamble in 2014 to salvage their D has turned Clay Matthews into an entirely new breed of monster.

BY DAVID FLEMING



ustling through a twisty corridor deep inside Lambeau Field, Clay Matthews strides toward the players' parking lot with the chilling, outta-my-way intensity he normally aims at quarterbacks. The Pro Bowler's explanation for racing off after this Friday practice includes a bit of breaking news: He's trying to make a last-second appointment with his—gasp—hairdresser. A Packers employee and a reporter trail the linebacker, and the news stops all in their tracks, including Matthews. He massages the striped wool cap covering his iconic blond locks and imagines the apocalyptic-level response this news might inspire in Hollywood, on Madison Avenue and especially here in Green Bay, where just yesterday the local TV news led with a segment about stores selling out of the new Clay Matthews Christmas tree ornament.

Matthews spins around and throws up a hand—wait. Just a trim, he clarifies with a chuckle. A little light grooming in preparation for his infant son Clay IV's baptism in California, during the Packers' bye week.

For the past seven seasons, Matthews' trademark tresses have been everywhere: from a cameo a cappella battle this summer vs. the evil

Matthews is projected to finish the year with nearly as many sacks in his first seven seasons (73) as Lawrence Taylor had in his.

Das Sound Machine in *Pitch Perfect 2*, to the NFL sack leaders list this fall. Before Week 5, there was even a decent facsimile of Matthews' locks streaking across the practice field in St. Louis: The Rams prepped for their game at Lambeau by having scout-team linebacker Daren Bates don a Christina Aguilera-style wig to help quarterback Nick Foles and the St. Louis offense identify Matthews' whereabouts. (For good measure, this season Matthews has also added a beard that, honestly, makes him look like a cross between Vincent van Gogh and Yukon Cornelius.)

Even with these follicle clues and Bates' method acting, the Rams couldn't keep track of Matthews, who in the past year has made the unprecedented switch from edge-rushing specialist to do-it-all inside linebacker. Terrorized from every spot on the field, Foles completed just 11 of 30 passes and threw four picks while being sacked three times and hit 14, including a gruesome helmet-first, sternum-cracking torpedoing that earned Matthews a \$17,363 fine. That interaction was only slightly less painful and humiliating than what Matthews put Colin Kaepernick through a week earlier, when he co-opted the kiss-the-biceps celebration of the struggling 49ers QB and reminded the poor guy over an open field mic, "You ain't Russell Wilson, bro!"

Matthews' switch to inside 'backer, which began as a gamble to kick-start the Packers' defense a year ago, has indeed grown into something bordering on the extraordinary: an evolutionary leap in linebacker play that has transformed Matthews into a versatile Swiss Army knife and a front-runner for defensive player of the year while elevating the Packers, who started 6-0, into Super Bowl contention. In the age of the NFL specialist, Matthews' move is unparalleled. Nobody with five Pro Bowls under his belt just changes positions like swapping a hairstyle and gets ... better. Matthews' 13 sacks in his past 14 games through Week 6 was third most in the NFL during that stretch, behind the Texans' J.J. Watt (16) and the Chiefs' Justin Houston (14). "Clay has evolved into something completely new," says Packers assistant head coach Winston Moss, 49, who played 11 NFL seasons as a linebacker. "He's whatever's next, the Terminator nobody has an answer for yet."

BY WEEK 8 of the 2014 season, the bottom had dropped out of the Green Bay defense. Saints running back Mark Ingram had gashed the Packers for a career-high 172 yards in a 44-23 loss that left Green Bay teetering at 5-3 and dead last in rushing defense. During the following bye week,

MOLDING CLAY

Moving Clay Matthews inside has created a world of possibility for the Green Bay defense. Here, two key plays from this season that resulted from Matthews' newfound flexibility. —MATTHEW BOWEN

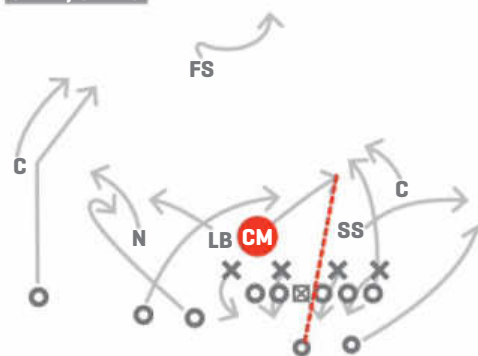


WEEK 1

PACKERS VS. BEARS

4TH QTR, 1ST & 10 AT GB 29

GB 24, CHI 16



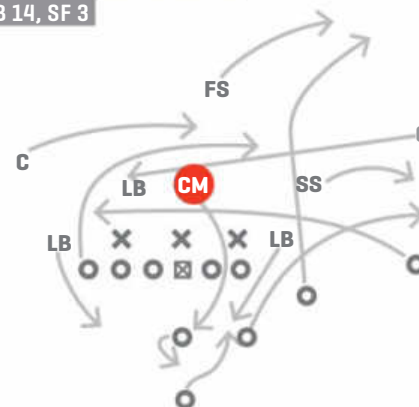
- 1 The Packers want Bears QB Jay Cutler to think blitz, so they overload the weak side and walk Matthews up to the line. But at the snap, both he and LB Nate Palmer drop back into zone.
- 2 With the left side of the formation overloaded, Cutler focuses on the right, where there are fewer Packers. RB Matt Forte is covered, so the QB locks in on TE Martellus Bennett.
- 3 The play looks golden to Cutler, with the corner playing Bennett to the outside. But Cutler never accounts for Matthews, who reads his eyes and steps in for the interception that all but closes out the win.

WEEK 4

PACKERS VS. 49ERS

3RD QTR, 3RD & 4 AT SF 26

GB 14, SF 3



- 1 With the 49ers in their heavy personnel [two backs and two tight ends], the Packers rush six men out of their base 3-4 front. At the snap, both outside linebackers and Matthews blitz.
- 2 The 49ers are running a play designed to beat man coverage, but with the blitz, 49ers QB Colin Kaepernick has to make a quick read.
- 3 Before the play starts, Matthews creeps toward the line of scrimmage, so when the ball is snapped, he's timed the blitz perfectly: He hits the B-gap at full speed, sacking Kaepernick before he can find an open target. It's a key third-down stop in another Green Bay victory.



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GOLDEN-HAIRED HIT MAN: SINCE MATTHEWS WAS DRAFTED IN 2009, NO FULL-TIME LB HAS TALLIED MORE SACKS ...

CLAY MATTHEWS
65.5

TERRELL SUGGS
53.5

VON MILLER
52

JAMES HARRISON
45

SHAUN PHILLIPS
43

coach Mike McCarthy and his staff realized that Matthews was struggling as well. Teams had begun to neutralize him with extra blockers in the backfield or simply had run or rolled away from him, causing him to helplessly flutter behind plays like a kite tail. With Matthews, Julius Peppers and 2012 first-round pick Nick Perry, the Packers had plenty of speed and athleticism on the edge to disrupt the quarterback. But all that talent was going to waste because Green Bay couldn't stop the run or even slow it down enough to force teams into obvious passing situations.

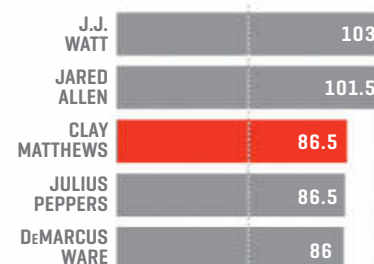
So McCarthy summoned Matthews to his office for a chat. At the time, the All-Pro had just 2½ sacks and figured he was getting a rah-rah speech about ramping up his play in the season's second half. Instead, McCarthy asked him how he'd feel about switching to the inside. It was a huge request and an even bigger risk for Matthews. "There was a lot of hesitation and reluctance," he says. "I had a lot of success, so why change something that's been working for us?"

Matthews had become a marquee talent and a very rich one at that—he'd signed a five-year, \$66 million extension in 2013—by focusing on one thing: putting the fear of God in quarterbacks with signature outside rushes. The Packers were now

asking him to trade that in for the exhausting grunt work of an inside linebacker. No more one-on-one matchups. Maybe even no more sack dances. All he could seemingly look forward to was wave after suffocating wave of handsy, wide-body linemen, endless sideline-to-sideline responsibilities and the constant threat of 225-pound running backs heading his way at full speed. "Two different worlds," Matthews says. In a 3-4 defense, switching to the inside from outside linebacker—which is essentially a defensive end—is like the Steelers asking Antonio Brown to move to fullback or someone suggesting Kanye West would actually be more effective as a roadie. That wasn't even the craziest part of the ask. If he accepted, Matthews would need to learn his new position in five days. "That first day when we approached him, he was kind of like, 'You're gonna do what? And when?'" says Packers defensive coordinator Dom Capers.

Still, Matthews told McCarthy, "I'm up for it." He figured it was a few plays per game, probably in the form of a single inside blitz package. He didn't fully understand what he had agreed to until that next Monday morning, when he was kicked out of his normal meeting group and told to report with the rest of the inside 'backers. "I was scared to death about the middle linebacker thing," Matthews says.

... OR DISRUPTED MORE DROPPACKS (SACKS, BATTED BALLS, INTERCEPTIONS, PASSES DEFENDED) THAN MATTHEWS.



All stats through Week 6.

"Am I gonna be any good at this? Will I get the same numbers or productivity?" After what he calls a crash course in footwork, formations and "other stuff I probably hadn't done since high school," he took his new spot inside against Chicago, terrified that he might fall flat on his face on national television.

HIS CONCERNS WERE not without merit. On the outside, positioning and tactics had limited Matthews' responsibilities and reach to as little as one-fourth of the field, where he concentrated on

FORWARD

setting the edge and mastering his one-on-one matchups against blockers. Inside, there were 10 times as many moving parts and 75 percent more real estate to cover. Before the snap, Matthews' mental Rolodex spun through the guard's footwork, the receivers' splits, which way the QB opened up and the constant threat of play-action. "Pass-rushing from the outside is all about explosive movements—boom, boom, boom—off the line," Matthews says. "The inside requires you to take a step back, be very in tune and play smart first, before you play fast."

In that first start against the Bears, though, Matthews was everywhere, a green Tasmanian devil. He made 11 tackles, many of them on the inside after fighting through blockers; had two takedowns for loss, one from the left side on a reverse; and got a sack while rushing from the right end, triggered by a sick downfield stutter-step move that made Bears tackle Jermon Bushrod look as if he had temporarily lost consciousness. Green Bay won in a rout 55-14, holding the Bears to 55 yards rushing after Chicago had piled up 235 yards on the ground in their first meeting.

Matthews was the same Matthews—only now with exponentially more space and opportunities to wreak havoc. The Packers went on to win seven of their next eight games before falling to Seattle in overtime in the NFC championship. Playing him inside had opened up opportunities on the edge for Perry, Mike Neal and others. With their best 11 defenders on the field, the Packers could pressure the quarterback without committing extra players to the rush, which in turn freed them up to flood the defensive backfield, which led to more takeaways (37 since 2014) and provided Aaron Rodgers with more possessions to convert into points (27.3 points per game, fifth best in the NFL), which, of course, translated to more Lambeau Leaps—and six wins to start this season. "It's so nice, in a league that is such a matchup game, to have that rare guy like Clay who gives you so much flexibility," Capers says.

This season the Packers have let Matthews experiment even more. "On five different snaps now, he might be aligned in five different places," Capers says. On the inside in Week 1 against the Bears, Matthews baited Jay Cutler into throwing to his tight end in the fourth quarter, then picked off the pass and returned it 48 yards to preserve a 31-23 win. The next week against Seattle, with the Packers needing to contain Marshawn Lynch, Matthews says he didn't rush once from the outside. Against the 49ers two weeks later, he played 24 of his 50 snaps at his old position. "He



loves rushing the passer, so he's always in our ear," Moss says. "If he's got the run thing handled on the inside, that's when I'll start getting The Look. The 'Can I get a little rush on the edge?' look."

Capers usually relents and sends Matthews to the outside; his 4½ sacks through Week 6 ranked sixth in the NFL. Then it's back inside. Or, when necessary, Matthews will put his fist in the dirt as a down lineman. Or maybe he'll sprint down the seam in the opposite direction covering a tight end as a glorified defensive back. The experiment has gone so well that both Moss and Capers have hinted that Matthews might be on the move again. "I guess it's only a matter of time before I switch up to play safety back there," says Matthews, only half joking. Capers adds: "We'll keep him limited to

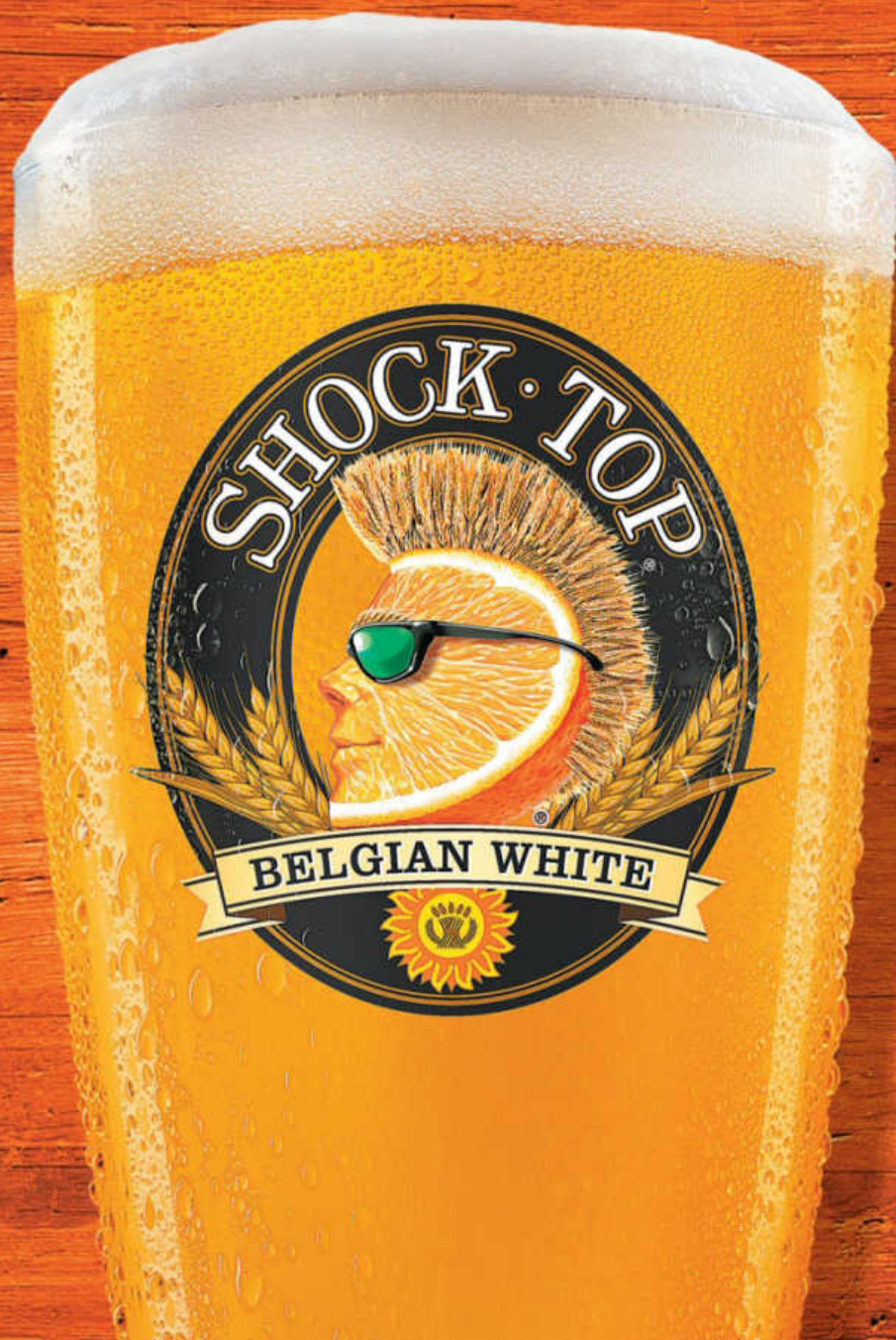
Matthews' sack dance might pale in comparison to his footwork in *Pitch Perfect 2*, but regardless of his role, he's shown all the right moves.

defense, that's all I can say. We don't need him going over to catch touchdown passes."

Good, because the only thing harder than tracking Matthews' whereabouts these days is figuring out how to classify him. Is he an inside or an outside linebacker? A Mike 'backer? A hybrid? The Hairminator? Das Sack Machine? "Yeah, I'm not sure what to call him either," Moss says. "The Transformer? The Asset? The Clayminator? Come up with something and get back to me."

How about: MVP. ■

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ZOOM

WHO
SCOTT DIXON

WHAT
GOODWOOD REVIVAL

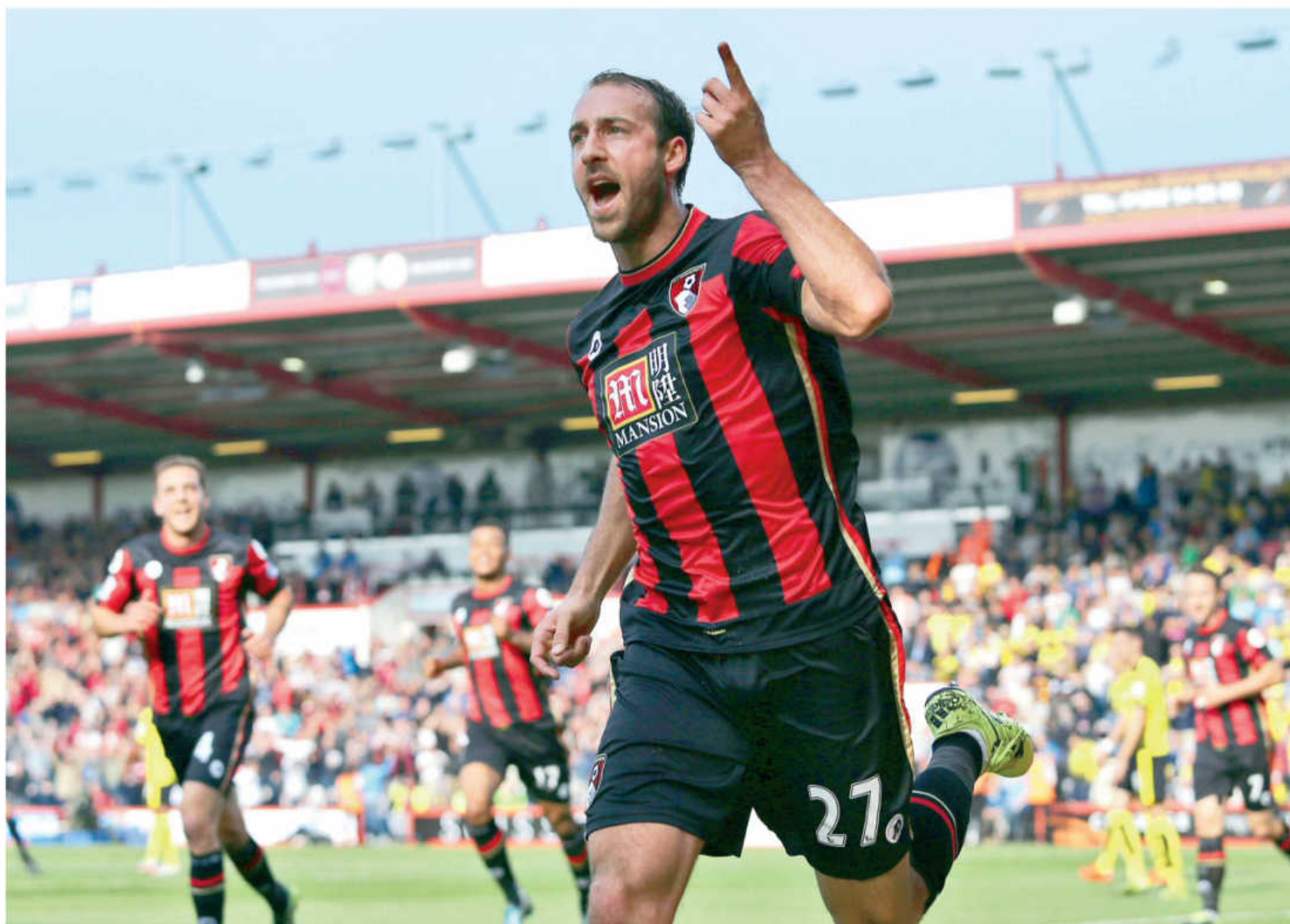
WHEN
SEPT. 12,
4:04 P.M. BST

WHERE
CHICHESTER,
WEST SUSSEX, U.K.

The Goodwood Revival is a motor-sports time warp. The annual event's 2.4-mile course, on the estate of the Duke of Richmond, held races from 1948 to '66. Now it hosts machines of that era, piloted by period-costumed racers of today. Just-crowned IndyCar champion Scott Dixon slid into this Cooper T51, built and raced in the '50s by Formula One legend Bruce McLaren, as retired driver Dario Franchitti (in blue) looked on. "Being in one of my idol's cars, from New Zealand like me, is a special feeling," Dixon says. It was an emotional trip for the four-time champ, starting with a funeral two days earlier in Northamptonshire for close friend and rival Justin Wilson, killed at an IndyCar race in August. Goodwood gave the drivers a place to reunite and reflect. "The racing family is small and very tight across all forms," Dixon says. "Goodwood has a wide spectrum from F1 to IndyCar, drivers from 20 to 60 years old. I'm reminded that no matter where I am in the world, it's a family." —RYAN MCGEE

PHOTOGRAPH BY LEVON BISS





Believe It, Bournemouth!

How did a team from a quaint seaside town rise from the bottom of England's lowest division to play against the big boys in the Premier League? One miracle at a time.

BY BRUCE SCHOENFELD
AN ESPN FC COLLABORATION

Thanks to Glenn Murray's goal, the Cherries played to a 1-1 draw against Watford on Oct. 3. But for many fans like Lance Payer (at left, center), results are just a bonus. He has followed the club for three decades and calls its ascension to the Premier League "unimaginable."

BOURNEMOUTH'S MIRACULOUS CLIMB

2008-09 LEAGUE TWO
Only a late-season win keeps the club from the amateur ranks—or bankruptcy.

2009-10 LEAGUE TWO
The Cherries, with a second-place finish, earn promotion to League One.



It's a typical November day in Dorset, on England's southern coast, except that it's August. The wind is blowing hard from the Channel. Raindrops pelt the tourists on Bournemouth Pier. The temperature hovers in the low 50s. "Football weather," says a man in a puffy jacket outside the AFC Bournemouth shop in Vitality Stadium. That is far

from ideal for a beach resort, but you won't hear the locals complain. They have been waiting for this season for nearly a hundred years.

Six days earlier, on Aug. 8, Bournemouth played Aston Villa in an English Premier League match. It marked the club's first game in English soccer's top classification in the 85 seasons in which it has competed nationally. In doing so, Bournemouth became one of the smallest towns (population:

180,000) ever to play in the EPL, and Vitality the smallest venue (capacity: 11,464) to stage a Premier League event. Imagine the Toledo Mud Hens suddenly showing up in the standings with the Yankees and Red Sox, wearing their goofy cartoon hats on national television at the Big A or Safeco or Camden Yards. Then understand that Toledo has a population one-third larger than Bournemouth.

And such superlatives—or, in this case,

diminutives—tell only part of the story. The 1-0 loss to Villa culminated a journey so improbable that it pushes the limits of conventional narrative. The idea of a team advancing through England's 92-club, four-tier league system to the EPL is surprising enough. It rarely happens, even over a generation—let alone in the span of five years. In English soccer, the same marginal sides tend to bob up and down from the top of the second-highest division to the bottom of the first.

But if any club could do it ... well, Bournemouth would not be it. Let's get straight from the start that this isn't a football town. Beyond London, football towns are mostly set in England's industrial north, where the sport has its roots. Grime-covered factory workers would take Saturdays off from their Dickensian labors to boot a ball around, one village against another. Greater Bournemouth,

2012-13 LEAGUE ONE

A second promotion in four seasons sees the Cherries reach the second division.

2014-15 CHAMPIONSHIP

With a final-week win, the club seals the Championship title as well as a Prem spot.

2015-16 PREMIER LEAGUE

On Aug. 8, Bournemouth plays the first EPL game in its 116-year history.



Just months after chairman Jeff Mostyn lifted the second-division trophy, Matt Ritchie scored in the club's second-ever Premier League win.

“HOW CAN ANYONE imagine the unimaginable?” asks Lance Phayer, looking up from his beer on a Saturday afternoon. A middle-aged man who owns a decorating company, Phayer is drinking at the Queens Park Hotel—which is far less a hotel than a faded pub near the stadium, and serves as the unofficial headquarters of the Bournemouth faithful. He’s anticipating his trip to Liverpool on Monday, six hours by bus if you include bathroom stops. In three decades of following the Cherries, he has visited 75 of the 92 venues that currently house Football Association teams. “It’s the Premier League I don’t have,” he says.

That’s about to change. Bournemouth’s first away-game venue, Liverpool’s historic Anfield, is the closest that soccer gets to Wrigley or Fenway. Asked about his team’s chances, Phayer takes a drink and comes up with flashing eyes. He seems ready to predict what fans call “a result”—either an outright Bournemouth win or a valuable road draw. He does something else entirely. “I don’t care,” he says, “if they don’t score a goal. I don’t care if they don’t score all season. We’re mixing with the big boys now. We’re there.” His voice drops to a whisper. “There’s a lot of us who’ve been following the club for years who think, ‘That’ll do.’”

In English football, the top teams in each classification at the end of a season jump to the next one up, while the bottom teams fall to the one below. It’s theoretically a fluid system, but economics provide stability. Arsenal, with its 60,000-seat venue and worldwide fan base, isn’t in danger of dropping from the Premier League any time soon. For the same reason, the likes of Torquay, Hartlepool and Scunthorpe have little chance of getting in.

For decades, that was Bournemouth. The team needed 57 seasons of professional football to get as far as the second-highest classification, in 1987. After three years, it returned to the third. Then it slid back into the fourth. As soccer became a bigger business in Britain, Bournemouth proved inept at that too. “There’ve been three or four occasions that it ain’t looked good,” says Ronnie Finch, 57, a retired pipe fitter who says he has been going to Bournemouth matches, home and away, since the 1960s. “Not that it ever looked brilliant.”

by contrast, is known for budget travelers on holiday, English-language schools for aspirational Eastern Europeans, bachelorette parties for Londoners in platform heels and—more than anything—elderly retirees. That’s hardly the demographic for sports fervor. “When I first came here,” says Jeff Mostyn, the club’s chairman, “the chief executive told me, ‘We’re going to start a park-and-ride to help get people to the stadium.’ After I saw the crowd at the first game, I said to him, ‘You didn’t tell me we’d need ambulances instead of buses.’”

At one point a few years ago, the club’s marketing department decided spontaneously to give a season ticket to the first person spotted wearing a Cherries jersey. Employees set up downtown one morning and waited—and this is not apocryphal—all day and into a second

afternoon before an appropriately attired fan wandered by. Last winter, when a club of hardy swimmers met for their Christmas plunge in the frigid Channel, Bournemouth’s then-mayor turned up in a Southampton jersey. Even on the buses that carry fans to away games, evidence of affection was elusive. “You’d have thought you were on the wrong coach,” Mostyn says. “Because they’d be wearing Manchester United shirts, Tottenham, Arsenal, Chelsea.”

Somehow, the Rasputin of the Football Association managed to survive. In 2009, the club faced a pivotal game that would ensure its place in professional soccer—and it won. And then that fall, the strangest thing happened. Led by the youngest football manager in the country and with no players anyone had heard of, Bournemouth’s Cherries kept winning.

By 1997, the team was insolvent. A local lawyer named Trevor Watkins went from providing free advice to serving as the team's chairman after pleading for funds on a local radio station. He saved the club, re-signed Cherries defender Eddie Howe, a local boy, to a seven-year deal, then moved to London to do sports-transaction work.

But Bournemouth didn't stay saved. In 2008, the owner announced that without the immediate investment of 100,000 pounds, the club would cease to exist. "Buckets went 'round," says Chris Millar, now a contributor to Cherries chat rooms, who was a teenager then. "People were contributing 20 quid, 50 quid. I took everything in my pocket and threw it in."

The club hit bottom in 2009. It was millions of dollars in debt—again—and a few defeats from falling out of the fourth division into competition with weekend wingers and glorified amateurs. And that actually would have been the second-worst option. The worst, and most likely, was disbanding entirely. The league's governing body had penalized the team 17 points for financial mismanagement, saddling the club with an almost insurmountable disadvantage in League Two, the lowest of England's classifications.

The Cherries' fate could be determined against Grimsby Town in the season's second-to-last week. The only way to secure their safety—and guarantee that they wouldn't essentially cease to exist, at least in any recognizable form—was a win. They fell behind 1-0 but tied the game. Then they scored a late goal to win. As time expired, the grateful fans of England's 89th-best team rushed the field.

A few years later, in 2011, Russian businessman Maxim Demin bought a 50 percent stake in the club, by then in England's third division, from the contractor who'd been building him a mansion nearby, as if a failing football team was an optional add-on to the marble countertops. By 2013, Demin was the full owner, and he brought back Mostyn, who'd owned the club at one point along the way, to serve as the face of the team. The mysterious Russian did it with his typical aplomb. "You're listening, I'm talking," he said when Mostyn picked up the phone. "We've just had a board meeting. Congratulations, you are the chairman of the football club again."

FROM THE OUTSIDE, Vitality Stadium looks like a mail-order fulfillment center, except with a few banks of lights overhead. Inside, it feels like the practice facility that might be tucked behind a full-sized stadium. Liverpool's Anfield, known for its intimacy and charm, is almost four times larger—



Eddie Howe (center) has led the Cherries to three promotions in his six seasons at the helm, none more epic than last year's Championship title.

and is currently undergoing an expansion. The scale at Vitality is clearly unsustainable for the Premier League, but there has been one benefit. Because so few seats exist, the amount of income gained over the course of the season by even doubling ticket prices wouldn't buy an aging halfback. Accordingly, prices have been largely left alone.

Two days before the Liverpool game, Howe fidgets in the media room, telling the cameras and notepads what it will mean to play at Anfield in the team's first-ever Premier League away game. The answer: Not much. Despite attempts to get him to wax nostalgic about the bad old days, that leap from insolvency to international renown in half a decade, he won't budge. "I'm not really a reflective kind of person," he says. "I rarely look back."

It's probably just as well. Howe started with Bournemouth's junior teams at age 13. He'd already been there half his life when former Cherries manager Harry Redknapp snatched him away in 2002 to play for a Portsmouth club on its way to the EPL. But Howe would have no role in the promotion. In his first game, he tore up his knee. In his return game a year later, it happened again. So he came back to the only place that would take him, playing three more years at Bournemouth on ailing legs. On Dec. 31, 2008, Mostyn named the 31-year-old the club's manager. "People ask, 'What did you see in Eddie at that age to make you think he could manage?'" Mostyn says. "I tell them, and they think I'm joking, 'What

AN UNLIKELY RISE

91

At the start of the 2008-09 season, Bournemouth ranked 91st out of 92 clubs in English soccer. As of Oct. 23, it ranked 17th.

.15

The capacity of Bournemouth's Vitality Stadium (11,464) is a mere 15 percent of Manchester United's Old Trafford (75,653).

we saw was someone who we already employed. And not for a lot of money."

It's tempting to perceive Demin's resources as the reason for Bournemouth's revival. But really, the credit goes to Howe. The core of the team has remained stable. Demin has signed a few players—notably Callum Wilson, who led Bournemouth in scoring with 20 league goals last season, and Scottish international Matt Ritchie—but no major names. Instead of overarching talent, the Cherries

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have relied on possession football: sliding the ball from wing to wing, patiently waiting for an opening, playing a defensive brand of offense, understanding that ball control is the best defense.

In 2010, they were promoted to League One. Howe briefly left for Burnley but returned to Bournemouth in 2012. The Cherries finished second that season too and moved up to what is now called the Sky Bet Championship, one step below the Premier League. And last May, they clinched the championship of the Championship, scoring 98 goals and allowing just 45.

The celebration came in stages. Bournemouth's victory over Bolton on the penultimate weekend left Middlesbrough needing to outscore the Cherries by 20 goals to deny them a place in the 2015-16 Premier League. That wasn't going to happen, so fans flooded the field, carried players off on their shoulders and chanted in the streets late into the night. The season's final game, against Charlton, felt like a party from the start. That win, coupled with Watford's 1-1 draw, not only made promotion official but also clinched the title. Two days later, the team snaked through the town in open-top buses, past some 60,000 clamoring supporters who filled the sidewalks. It marked the first time since 1987, and only the second time ever, that Bournemouth had finished first at anything.

The Cherries' success is also helping change the town's image. The retirees still gather on weekdays at the bingo parlor, or for a 4 p.m. lamb's liver dinner at a nearby storefront café. But there are new boutiques and a bakery around the corner, and a funky fish-and-chips place, and a thriving new restaurant at the yacht club, and even a zip line on Bournemouth Pier, not far from where two new hotels are being built. "Bournemouth is moving up from a place where people came to die, or to build sandcastles, to a place that will be at the cutting edge of creativity in the 21st century," said Deryck Newland, the director of a local dance studio, when interviewed in August by *The Guardian*, one of England's national newspapers.

The renovation of Bournemouth's image had been set in motion before the club's precipitous rise, to be sure. But the Premier League success offers boosters a chance to crow. "It's not just football that has put the seaside town back on the map," *The Guardian* wrote. But football will make sure that they see that map in London, Manchester and everywhere the satellite networks and sports sections penetrate.

"You're finally part of the circus," says Watkins, who still won't miss a game. "And it's the circus everyone is watching."

BAD-LUCK BOURNEMOUTH

Staying up is never easy. Now, after a snakebitten start, the Cherries' task is even taller. —GUS ELVIN

AUG. 17

Bournemouth loses a controversial 1-0 contest against Liverpool at Anfield. First, a Cherries goal is disallowed for a light foul. Later in the first half, Liverpool's winning goal stands despite a clearly offside player making a play at the ball.

AUG. 29

In one game against Leicester City, Bournemouth loses its two most expensive signings: Tyrone Mings and Max Gradel both go off with knee injuries. Mings will miss the season with ACL and MCL tears, while Gradel will miss six months with an ACL tear.

SEPT. 26

Striker Callum Wilson goes down with an injury against Stoke City, later confirmed to be yet another ACL rupture. Wilson, who was last season's leading scorer and bagged five goals in six games before the injury, will also miss six months.

OCT. 3

A 1-1 draw with Watford epitomizes Bournemouth's tough-luck season: An early 1-0 lead is squandered after a howler from keeper Artur Boruc. Then, in the 83rd minute, Bournemouth draws a penalty, but Glenn Murray's spot kick is saved.

OCT. 14

The club announces that captain Tommy Elphick will be out up to 10 weeks after having ankle surgery to repair an injury originally suffered in August. Elphick, captain since 2012-13, was at the heart of the club's last two promotion campaigns.

THE CHERRIES DON'T win or even score at Anfield. At his postmatch news conference, Howe sounds both sanguine and aggrieved. A loss, even a 1-0 loss on a disputed goal against a top club away from home, is no cause for joy. Yet he understands that competitiveness comes through incremental gains. "It gives players confidence we can succeed at this level," he says. "It's a tough league, an unforgiving league, but we're playing the style of football we need to be successful."

"We want to play these big teams," said Dan Gosling, one of the few Cherries with Premier League experience following stints at Everton and Newcastle. "We did so well last year, and the aim was to get promoted and play the best teams in the world. ... But we're not there to collect souvenirs. We want to win."

Five days later, on Aug. 22, Bournemouth wins. At West Ham's Upton Park, Wilson scores his club's first Premier League goal, then its second and then its fourth as the Cherries hang on 4-3. And the following Saturday—at the same time that West Ham is thrashing Liverpool 3-0, by the way—Wilson scores against Leicester on an acrobatic overhead kick. Two seasons ago, he was scoring goals in League One. Suddenly he had four of them in four Premier League games. "It's made my confidence go sky-high," he says. At that moment, Bournemouth stood exactly in the

middle of the Premier League table.

What followed were the usual vicissitudes of a newly promoted team. The draws and losses were punctuated by another win, against Sunderland. A run of injuries exposed a lack of depth that's typical for first-year EPL clubs, which don't want too many expensive players under contract in case their fortunes should turn. Yet somehow, the Cherries have remained competitive, game after game, except for a 5-1, welcome-to-the-big-time thrashing by Manchester City on Oct. 17.

That result put the club in a precarious position, just one place above the relegation zone. Accordingly, the team's supporters take nothing for granted. Millar attended his first Bournemouth game at age 4 and has resisted the allure of bigger clubs ever since. He has informed the supervisor at his engineering firm that he'll be absent periodically through May. "Any away game—a Thursday up in Newcastle, whatever—I'm going," he says. "It's basically one year. It may never happen again in my lifetime."

Sitting just off the main square, he's bundled in a faded AFC Bournemouth fleece from, like, three bankruptcies ago. He recites a litany of places he has visited in the service of supporting Bournemouth: "Hartlepool and Colchester. Rochdale. Exeter. Carlisle." The current itinerary, by contrast, includes Manchester, Liverpool and half a dozen visits to London.

"I used to say, 'I hate the Premier League,'" Millar says. "It was so big. Too much money in it. And Bournemouth hadn't been there. Now? I love it. This year, anyway." ■

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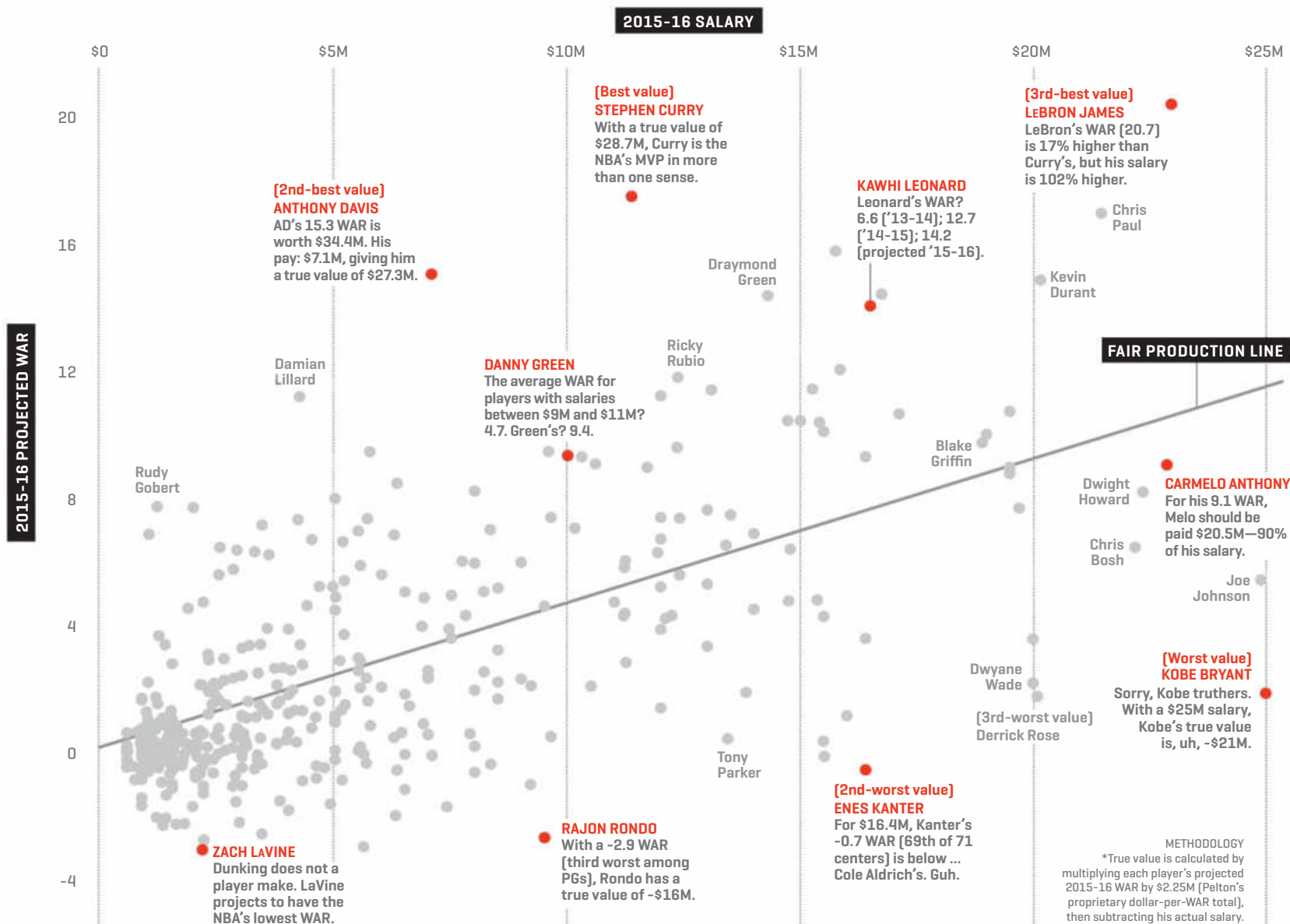


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News flash: Carmelo Anthony isn't worth the money—and our graph shows it. We plotted every NBA player by projected WAR and '15-16 salary, then drew a “fair production” line for what each player *should* produce for his salary (with each WAR worth \$2.25M). Above the line? He overdelivers. Below it? Underdelivers. We also called out a few players using true value,* a new metric from Insider Kevin Pelton that shows the gap between what a player is paid and what he's worth. Melo's worth? Well, not \$22.9M. —ROSS MARRINSON AND LUKE KNOX





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BEING OUT

BY CHRISTINA KAHRL

Not so long ago, it seemed as if it was finally happening, that the revolution of athletes coming out of the closet had arrived and was passing, all within a few short years.

Robbie Rogers had come out and played in MLS. College hoops star Brittney Griner had come out and played in the WNBA. Veteran NBA big man Jason Collins had come out and joined the Nets for their playoff run. Defensive prospect Michael Sam had come out before the NFL draft and been selected by the Rams. • It looked as if we as a society were ready to take a quick leap from having no out gay athletes in major team sports to considering it ordinary. That what had been a thing might suddenly become no big thing. • Except that we haven't seen that. There was no wave of pro athletes coming out. Instead of seeing Michael Sam's sack dance on the gridiron, we saw him on *Dancing With the Stars*. Now Sam is most famous for



something he didn't get to do. And we haven't seen anybody come out in the major pro leagues since. What was a thing is still a thing, which leaves us with a big question: Who hit the pause button?

"For the most part, the gay revolution is over, and now we're in the gay evolution," says Hollywood PR guru Howard Bragman. "And evolutions move slower than revolutions."

Bragman is in a position to know. He's helped steer Collins, Sam, former NFL player Esera Tuaolo, former NBA player John Amaechi, former WNBA player Sheryl Swoopes and others through their public coming outs. His observation is a reminder that we haven't yet reached the end of the beginning and that what's to come is the hard work of forging not just acceptance or understanding but actual integration.

THE CHALLENGE OF coming out is complicated for athletes who are already juggling more familiar pressures. There's the pressure to perform on the field, to have a full career. There's the pressure of fulfilling expectations—imposed by outsiders or oneself—of how to be the player they always dreamed of becoming. And then, after coming out, there's the pressure of being a public torchbearer for the LGBT community. Suddenly, they must assume the media spotlight, as well as responsibilities to the advocacy community whose needs transcend excellence on the field. Not everyone wants to sign up for that. The rest of us have an obligation to ask ourselves why we would expect them to.

"Athletes watched what happened to Michael Sam," says former big leaguer Billy Bean, who came out publicly in 1999 after his career ended and now works on inclusion efforts for MLB. "And they're asking themselves: 'Are people going to forget that I'm a big league ballplayer, in my fourth year, chasing that big contract, trying to be an All-Star or the team MVP, and now I might be defined by something that has nothing to do with the thing that has been the most important thing to me since I was 8 years old?'"

It's important to remember that professional athletes didn't grow up in the more accepting environment we live in today;

chances are, in coming out, they have to overcome a lifetime of exposure to anti-gay attitudes. And the media often don't make the process any easier. Active top-level athletes not only have to find time to shoehorn their self-defining announcement somewhere into their careers, they then have to wind their way through the PR ritual. While that moment can help create visibility and understanding, in the sports world it often seems to have less to do with LGBT people embracing their truth among the people they work and live with and more to do with the media's self-importance. It's a news conference, or it didn't happen.

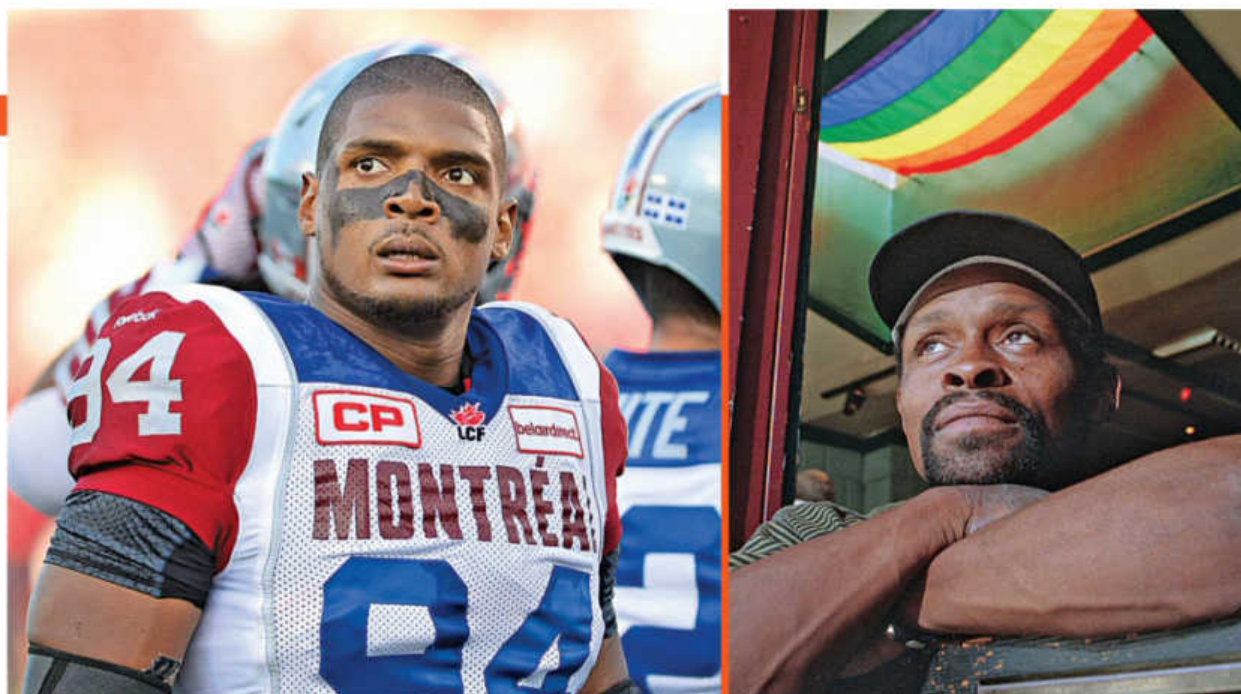
"You look at Jason, you look at Michael, it's a huge frickin' deal," Bragman says. "The media is just drooling like a dog, treating this like a piece of prime rib, waiting for this happen, and I think that media attention can be a magnifying glass that most people don't want to be under."

It's an observer's paradox, in which the journalist and the wider world insert their own perspectives into whatever the athlete needs to say in coming out. "Michael Sam is a great example of this, a guy who gets ordained as our 'leader,' and then once that story has been out there, he's on his own," Bean says. "You hear him now, and it's starting to feel like he's starting to think that if he had to do it over again, he might do it differently than

the way he did it. It's a beginning, not some culmination, the decision to come out. The guy still has to go out and play."

Rather than indulging this self-absorbed mania for the new as a way of demonstrating how much better things are today, we should remember the history of LGBT people in sports. In MLB, for every David Denson (the Brewers prospect who came out this summer) or Sean Conroy (the independent league pitcher who did the same), there are former big leaguers like Glenn Burke and Bean, or umpire Dave Pallone. For every Michael Sam in the NFL, there's a Dave Kopay or Esera Tuaolo or Wade Davis or Jerry Smith. LGBT people have played sports for decades. This isn't new, even if it's news.

The "outness" of historical figures is often a matter of opinion or moral relativism, telling us more about the expectations we have of athletes than whether or not they lived their truth. Many teammates and opponents knew that Burke and Smith were gay—Burke in particular suffered for it at the hands of A's manager Billy Martin in the late 1970s and early '80s, while Smith was accepted by Hall of Fame coach Vince Lombardi a decade earlier. "Glenn would have thrived in this generation, because he was unafraid to say, 'This is me, if you don't like me, tough s---,'" Bean says of Burke. "But he was way ahead of his time."



There is also a different set of expectations placed on athletes coming out today—a balancing act that isn't easy to manage in addition to an active career. "These things aren't necessarily core to how you want to be perceived as an athlete," Bragman says. "Unless you're someone at the end of your career, like Jason, you don't want to be perceived as an activist, you want to be perceived as an athlete. Yet at the same time, by the simple act of coming out, you're an activist!"

The majority of gay, lesbian and transgender athletes don't want to spend much time talking about what makes them different. "Unless you're in the elite 5 percent who don't have anything to worry about, you're somebody who's worried about your job every week on every play," Bragman adds. "And talking to some of the guys who are in the closet, they just don't want to make it an issue. They would just like to play and go on and deal with it later." Instead, they're looking for cues that it's OK to be different while they strive within their sports to be like everyone else on the field. It's a delicate balance that's negotiated in real time, and the process doesn't stop after an athlete's coming-out moment, as shown by Derrick Gordon's complicated evolution over the past year and a half. Achieving that balance happens only on a case-by-case basis; it depends on the strength of the individual allies that

Brittney Griner and Michael Sam followed a path paved by former pros Billie Jean King and Glenn Burke, among others.

LGBT players find in each locker room.

"We need people ready to send micro-signals so that athletes know, if they were to come forward, that people would have their back," Collins says. "I had those signals from Doc Rivers when I was a player; he did an interview with an LGBT magazine. He was asked about how he would respond if a player came out, and he said that player would be treated no differently than any other member of the team. So I knew that I would have an ally when I read that article."

THIS CAN, ALL told, make for a complicated landscape for LGBT athletes trying to navigate a decision to come out publicly—but that's not to say there hasn't been progress. First, all of the major pro leagues have adopted policies and public stances that show an enthusiasm to embrace their LGBT employees. The overt discrimination Burke faced isn't likely to happen today, at least not in a pro locker room.

Meanwhile, the wave of coming-out stories *has* come, and it's bigger, deeper and more permanent than anything we've seen before at the highest levels of pro sports. If athletes in their 20s or 30s—a generation that grew up with gay-straight alliances in their schools—aren't ready to come out publicly for the benefit of the media or the LGBT community, younger athletes see far less to lose. Hardly a week

goes by without another teen's coming-out story on Outsports.com.

"David Denson has a unique opportunity to prove he can play every day in the minor leagues," Bean says, "and if he can kick some butt the next two or three seasons, with that question already out there, and the Brewers get to see him, they're not going to hesitate to bring him up if he can help them. He may have taken the pressure off himself without even realizing it, because he'll have gotten all of this out of the way in the minors."

Each of these developments adds up to a future all stakeholders want: that time when anyone can be out, with nobody making a big deal of it. And it creates an interesting situation for the media. If somebody who came out in high school plays in college and then goes pro, does that "count," even if it wasn't leveraged around a high-profile media moment? The revolution has already come, even if nobody was there to report it.

"I think we're moving at the same speed that civil rights movements do," says Helen Carroll, a former NCAA women's basketball coach and now sports projects director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights. "I think what we're seeing that is huge is the big number of college athletes who come out, get support from their coaches, writing their own stories. And we're seeing a big number of high school athletes come out. We're even seeing junior high school students coming out and have the support of their parents. So my thought is that in five years, we're going to be where we want to be today."

In the meantime, the most helpful step—for those who watch sports and for those who cover them—is to take a step back and let these moments happen. What athletes coming out want, in addition to shedding the burden of being in the closet, is to be accepted—not on the basis of what makes them different, but on what makes them the same as everyone else on the field: They're here to play. ■





OPEN

BEING OUT

IN THE

Derrick Gordon has been embraced by family and teammates since becoming the first openly gay Division I men's basketball player. But entering the spotlight is sometimes easier than walking away.

BY PABLO S. TORRE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
RAFA ALVAREZ

CORNER

IN THE YEAR AFTER HE MADE HISTORY, IT SEEMED LIKE THE MOST AMAZING THING THAT HAPPENED TO DERRICK GORDON WAS THAT NOTHING REALLY DID.

There was the initial spike in exposure on April 9, 2014, when he became the first openly gay player in Division I men's basketball. And there was the predictably toxic faction of the Internet that derided his quotes to ESPN ("I feel so good right now"), Outsports.com ("I can finally breathe") and *The New York Times* ("I didn't want to keep hiding"). But Michael Sam had come out only two months before Gordon; Jason Collins 10 months before that. In a country on the verge of legalizing same-sex marriage, news of a University of Massachusetts Amherst guard with an indiscernible pro trajectory almost felt routine.

The record shows that Gordon's teammates—to whom he'd come out at a meeting led by their head coach, Derek Kellogg—responded with support. "You're our family; we love you," one player told him. Gordon's actual family said the same. Come basketball

season last fall, any strains of intolerance at otherwise hostile arenas proved categorically mute. "At the beginning, people were saying, 'Fans are going to heckle him,'" Gordon recalls. "But I went to LSU, to BYU, to St. Bonaventure. Nobody said anything at all."

By then, Gordon had already changed the header of his Twitter account to a rainbow-colored logo reading #BETRUE. He'd Instagrammed grinning, shirtless selfies for his thousands of followers. And he'd kissed his date, an older white actor, on the flashbulb-lined red carpet of the 2014 GLAAD Media Awards in New York. In the absence of comparable case studies—Sam never survived the NFL preseason; Collins played 172 minutes in 22 games before retiring—Gordon's coming out and then, at long last, being out as an active athlete, was a signal. To countless young people, LGBT or not, he exemplified the progress America had made.

Which is why, this past spring, when Gordon vowed to transfer out of UMass in favor of a higher-profile D1 basketball program, his confidants had to flinch. Why risk losing such historic equilibrium? Being blissfully yourself while averaging a middling 9.8 points and 4.9 rebounds at a school you already attended was one thing. But finding a high-major team to opt in to an underperforming shooting guard who is also openly gay was, in its own way, more fraught than coming out. "For me, those variables are scary," says ex-NFL player Wade Davis, Gordon's mentor and an openly gay activist. But he adds: "Derrick is f---ing fearless."

Or, as Gordon puts it, "I want other people to look at me and say, 'OK, damn, he plays for a top school, he's one of the top players on his team and he's openly gay.' That's one of the main reasons I came out: to be myself."

It's a crisp night in mid-May, and Gordon and I are sitting at the TGI Fridays in his hometown of Plainfield, New Jersey. He is 6-foot-3 with a mild mohawk and a bright smile, the sort of bass-voiced college kid who gets hit on

upon entering a restaurant, as I can now officially attest. The hostess who shows us to our table caresses Gordon's muscled, tattoo-sleeved right forearm before asking if he thinks she's cute. The 23-year-old Gordon just grins until she leaves. "But if she'd stayed here," he says, "I would've been like, 'Uh, sorry to say it, but I'm gay.'"

Gordon's reason for transferring is wholly preprofessional. ("Derrick wants to play in the NBA," Davis told me. "Derrick is going to mention the NBA to you 10 times.") At UMass, he bristled under a limited offensive mandate, going 1-for-16 from behind the arc in two years. That stat—both the accuracy and the attempts—is hardly how he sees himself. At St. Patrick High School, Gordon played with Kyrie Irving and Michael Kidd-Gilchrist, both future lottery picks. At Western Kentucky, he was named to the All-Sun Belt Conference third team before transferring in 2012. Now he wanted an expanded role at an even bigger-name program. He wanted, as he announced on Twitter a few days before tonight's dinner, Seton Hall University: a Big East, Roman Catholic school in South Orange, all of 25 minutes from this table.

But as often as Gordon will mention his NBA ambitions—14 times at dinner alone—he must also be painfully aware that his professional stock is fading. And as both a player and a proxy for our collective progress, the very last thing Derrick Gordon wants to do is disappear.

FOR A LONG time, Gordon planned on coming out only when his college career ended. He had a bogus long-distance girlfriend and could keep a secret, so he figured he could survive. But everything changed one night during his first winter break at UMass, at about 11:30 p.m., while Gordon was dancing at his favorite gay club in Asbury Park, New Jersey. "I remember it like it was yesterday," he says. As his favorite song, "Sweet Nothing" by Calvin Harris, thumped over the speakers, he received a peculiar call from one of his teammates wanting to know which club he was inside. "Paradise," Gordon replied truthfully,

praying no one would recognize the name.

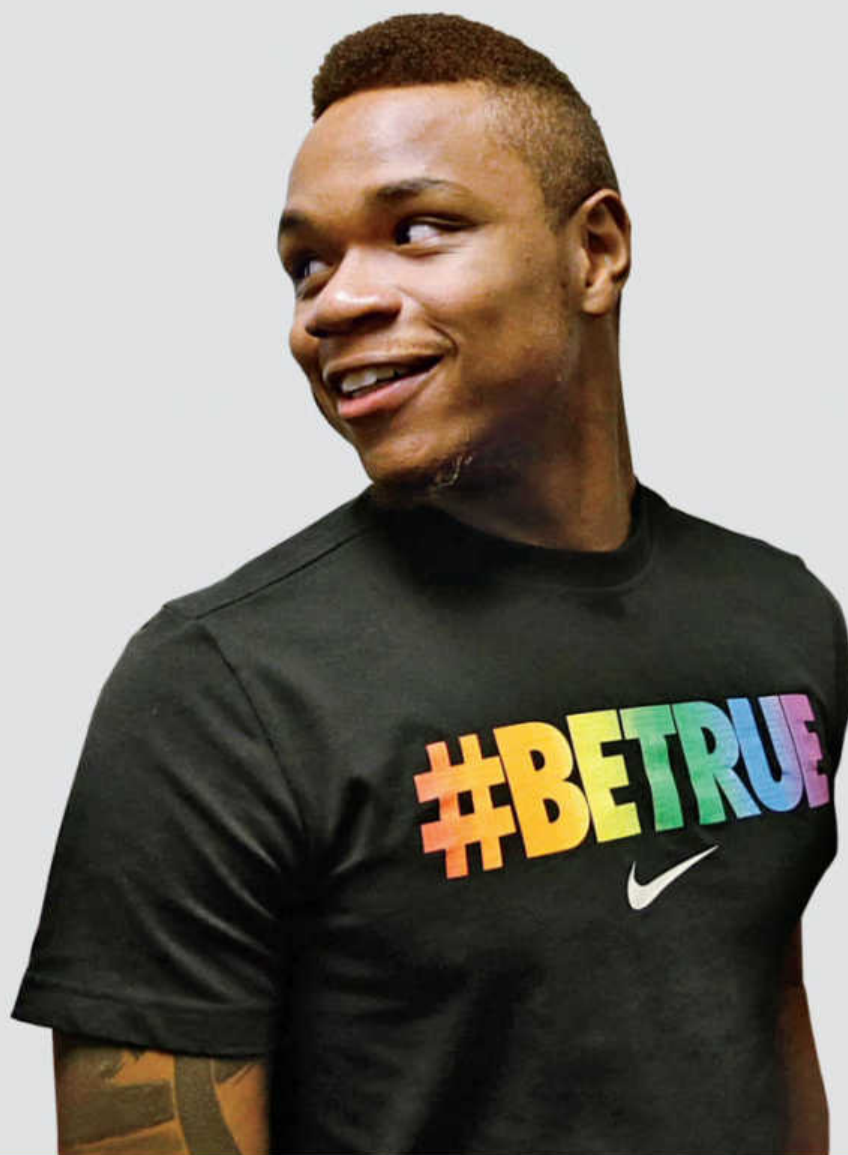
Cue a roomful of voices cackling in the background of the call. Cue the teammate hanging up. Cue a panicked Gordon taking a photo with two random women and texting it to his teammates, in an effort to pre-empt further inquiry.

Gordon soon realized, however, that a picture he'd Instagrammed earlier that night had inadvertently been geo-tagged, triggering the teammate's question. Weeks later, the locker room also discovered that Gordon had liked an Instagram photo in which he was posing alongside a man who was, as the team suspected, his boyfriend at the time. When confronted, Gordon repeatedly denied he was gay. "I've never run away before," he says. "But that's the time I really wanted to."

No, Gordon's teammates did not use slurs in their teasing. And yes, once he came out to the team in March 2014, they awkwardly explained that they were challenging not his sexuality but his denial.

But for over a year before coming out, most everything he did—eat, work out, play Call of Duty, cry—he did alone. Within the macho ecosystem of elite athletics, Gordon felt the sting of every smirk and every joke about going clubbing in Jersey. "Derrick needed community," says Davis, who became a sounding board. "He needed to talk."

At TGI Fridays, it turns out, there is still so much to talk about. Gordon speaks candidly, for hundreds upon hundreds of uninterrupted words, about what it's been like to learn to be himself. He discusses losing friends who don't approve. He



Gordon was all smiles after his April 2014 announcement, which made college sports history.

BEING OUT

recounts conversations with family members who embraced him immediately (his mother, Sandra, with whom he's "very close") as well as those who needed more time (his fraternal twin brother, Darryl, who was released from prison last fall after serving time for aggravated assault). He observes the tensions of interracial dating. He marvels at the frequency and forthrightness of lingering stares from interested men. "I didn't know how the gay world worked," Gordon says, shaking his head. "That was the old Derrick."

In this community, the new Derrick was also pretty famous. After going from a rough part of Jersey to rural Kentucky to a Massachusetts college town, he couldn't help but relish the time pop star Kylie Minogue danced atop his table at the GLAAD Awards; the time he was an ambassador at Miami Beach Gay Pride Weekend; the time he was feted at a Nike-sponsored LGBT sports summit in Portland, Oregon; the time he was a guest at a celebrity-studded Black AIDS Institute gala in Los Angeles; the time he wound up befriending Anderson Cooper, who once tweeted that watching Gordon "speak about being out and proud" was "incredibly courageous and inspiring."

"If I knew that all this stuff was going to happen to me," Gordon says now, "I would've come out as soon as I came out of my mom's stomach."

At dinner, Gordon keeps repeating how genuinely ecstatic he is—he will declare himself "happy" 16 times—even if he is currently crashing on a couch in his parents' house, a modest place with white siding and a wooden cavity where a doorbell once might have been. "Now me and my boyfriend, we hold hands," Gordon says. "In public, we do everything like a normal couple. I'll give him a kiss on the cheek or on the top of his head. And if I get drafted next year, I'll have my partner there with me, and it's going to be very respectful. Little half-second kiss, hug, go around the table, hug my family, go up onstage. That's how it's supposed to be. It's 2015!"

This dream—however unlikely for a prospect of his caliber—is why Gordon is off to Seton Hall, which cracked the Top 25



last season before its record plummeted to 16–15. "They want me to be a leader, to take control, to let me play freely and help them win games," he says. Just four days earlier, he committed to coach Kevin Willard on his first visit to campus and then proudly shared the decision with the world.

HONEST AS HE is—Gordon will invoke that adjective 23 times over three hours—there are two subjects he prefers not to discuss. First, as an aspiring draft pick, he figures he should steer clear of political issues—those related to LGBT civil rights activism, specifically—that could make him look like he's "worried about more than playing ball." And second, as an incoming student at Seton Hall—aka the Catholic University of New Jersey—Gordon knows to steer clear of the story of

After stints at Western Kentucky and UMass, Gordon will play his final season at Seton Hall with a singular dream—playing in the NBA.

the Rev. Warren Hall. "I'm here to play basketball," Gordon says, when asked about it. "That has nothing to do with me."

Exactly two days before Gordon's visit, Hall, a popular campus chaplain, made national news when he tweeted that he'd been fired from his post by the Archdiocese of Newark, which founded and operates the school. According to Hall, who taught a class titled Spirituality and Sports, the given reason was a Facebook photo he'd posted in support of NOH8, an LGBT civil rights campaign, last fall. The archdiocese, for its part, denied this connection, as well as a student petition to reinstate Hall, who would come out as gay to Outsports.com in late May. The archdiocese simply said Hall's assignment was ending.

At dinner, when I press Gordon on how much he knows about the Hall story—it had been covered by outlets from the *Asbury Park Press* to *The New York Times*—he shrugs. "None of that was a factor in my decision," he says. "All this outside stuff didn't cross my mind."

This sounds implausible. But when I ask Gordon what his second-choice school was, my skepticism drops. He did not have a second-choice school. Gordon's whole goal was to upgrade to a high-major conference, but only a few mid-majors—Bryant University, for instance—had cared to call.

"I was shocked," he says. "If Seton Hall didn't come after me, I'd be in a tough situation right now. That's just flat-out honesty. I don't know where I'd be."

Through texts and phone calls, Willard clearly wanted him when no one else did. That's what a devastated Gordon cared about the most. "Derrick didn't even realize the Catholic piece was there," Davis tells me. "He didn't even realize the school was Catholic."

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"I THINK HIS FOCUS IS ON BECOMING KNOWN AS DERRICK GORDON THE BASKETBALL PLAYER AGAIN, INSTEAD OF WHAT LAST YEAR WAS ALL ABOUT."

SETON HALL COACH KEVIN WILLARD

In general, Davis, the executive director of You Can Play, a nonprofit representing LGBT athletes, does not fault his mentee for turning away from larger political and religious debates. "It's just unfair for anyone to expect Derrick to be super engaged," Davis says. "He's gotta play well. He's not reading Audre Lorde and bell hooks and James Baldwin." The lesson Davis imparts to Gordon, for now, is more basic: Your visibility is your activism. His public presence is his platform. It's how he can inspire change.

Gordon is reminded of this every couple of days, when he invariably gets a message online from a young person asking for advice or wanting to thank him. Over Twitter (nearly 10,000 followers) and Facebook (more than 1,300), he's heard from closeted players in Division I and in top pro leagues overseas who all want to know whether the coast is really that clear.

But being a public figure has its hazards. Some people Gordon once trusted want to use him for his platform. And online, total strangers cut him down. "I'll read comments, and people will say, 'Why is this story up here? Why is this a big deal?'" Gordon says, his voice rising, sharpening. "Why is it a story? People are killing themselves just

because they feel like they can't be themselves. That's why it's a big deal. You got kids running away, people taking their lives at a young age. Because they feel like people like you aren't going to accept them for who they are." He takes a breath. "If it wasn't a big deal, everybody would be out. But I'm the only one right now. And I want that to change."

TWO WEEKS AFTER our dinner, Gordon Instagrams three new photos of himself in Florida, cheerfully posing with a new boyfriend—the types of pictures he once tried to hide from view. I take the opportunity to ask, via text message, if Gordon would want to be photographed for this story. "Oh wow sounds great," he replies.

Just two days later, though, Gordon sends another message, unprompted, with a request that a journalist is not permitted to grant: He wants to review and edit the story I'm working on before it's published. I ask why.

"I might not want some things in there," he writes. "I want the article to be about basketball and not about me being gay."

When I first scan this, I assume that the word "not" is a typo. Other than his detailed visions of being drafted, actual basketball constituted only a fraction of

our conversation. And given that Gordon steered clear of hot-button political and religious issues, I'm curious as to what he's suddenly afraid of.

My assignment, I tell him, has always been to find out what it's like to be an unapologetically gay player, this historic figure, in 2015.

"That side isn't going to help me," Gordon texts. "It will only hurt me."

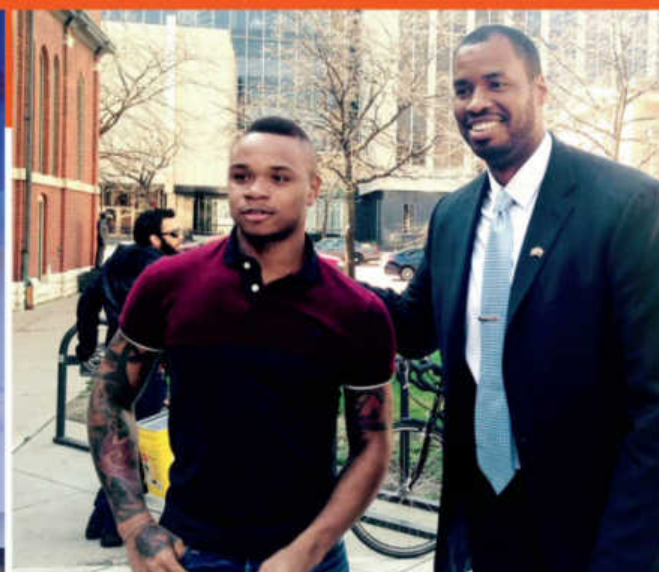
KEVIN WILLARD, NOW in his sixth year at the helm of Seton Hall basketball, initially studied Gordon when the guard was at St. Patrick and a solid 20 pounds lighter than his current 205-pound frame. The coach's first thoughts: Boy, that kid can really defend, he plays really hard, he's a great teammate. Gordon's biggest basketball strengths five years ago, in other words, remained the same as they are now. But Willard's second thought was about the main weakness that also remained: Boy, he really can't shoot—where am I going to play him?

It's a hot Thursday morning in mid-June, and the 40-year-old coach is sitting behind his giant brown desk inside Seton Hall's athletic building, a brick fort guarded by a bronze statue of a flag-hoisting pirate with a knife in his teeth. Willard tells me he finally got the answer to his question in April, when his own Jersey-made guard, Sterling Gibbs, announced he was transferring. "Thirty-two minutes opened up," Willard recalls. "My thought process was, 'All right, if I'm not going to be able to replace 17 points a game, which Sterling gave us, then I want to find somebody who can stop 17 points a game.'"

Enter Gordon, a skilled stopper who in the previous two years averaged 1.5 steals per game. "We weren't doing this for fun," Willard continues. "It just wasn't like, Hey, we want to bring Derrick home, and this is going to be great."

In truth, Seton Hall was struggling. Besides the loss of Gibbs, Jaren Sina, another starting guard, had transferred in the middle of the season. Suddenly the school had precisely one guard on the

Gordon initially welcomed his advocacy role, attending the GLAAD Media Awards and meeting Jason Collins at the Final Four in Indianapolis.



roster, Isaiah Whitehead, who'd cracked even nine points per game. The job security of Willard himself—a Rick Pitino disciple who hasn't made an NCAA tournament in five years at Seton Hall—was at stake. "I know that Derrick being one of the first college basketball players to come out to be gay seems to be the big story," Willard says. "But for me and everybody here, it's always been about basketball."

Upon my arrival, Willard directs Thomas Chen, the communications staffer who'd scheduled the interview, to join us and sit next to me. As we talk, the coach stresses that Gordon's sexuality has not been a focus for his staff or his school. "Not once," Willard says. "This university is unbelievable. They welcome everybody. I don't think anybody judges." We talk about how a handful of Gordon's new teammates have publicly welcomed him on Twitter already.

"Every kid that's played for me, everyone that will play for me, I love them, no matter who they are, what they are, what they do," Willard says. "I guess that's why, for me, this is almost a silly story. He's on my team, I love him and he's gonna be part of my family now."

When I ask about the firing of Warren Hall, Willard interrupts to offer no comment. And when I ask whether the coach was surprised that there wasn't more interest in Gordon from other schools, there's no comment. And when I ask whether Willard is going to say anything to his team about how to approach LGBT topics, there's no comment. And when I ask whether he talked to anyone at UMass before recruiting Gordon, there's no comment. "I'm not trying to be an a--hole, which I'm being a little bit right now," Willard says, in the middle of so much self-censorship. "But it's a dance I gotta dance."

As we begin to wrap up our 45 minutes together, I pose the question that's been lodged in my brain ever since I got those self-contradictory texts from the newest member of the Seton Hall family. Would the school mind if the first and only openly gay man in Division I hoops talks about topics beyond the game?

"I don't think you're allowed to tell a student what you can say

or what you can't say," Willard says. "But I think I know what his focus is, and I think his focus is on becoming known as Derrick Gordon the basketball player again, instead of what last year was about." Before I walk out of the room with Chen, Willard offers one final observation.

"To me," he says, "this is a nonstory."

I tell him it sounds like he's suggesting that in a perfect world, this story wouldn't exist.

"Yeah," Willard replies, chuckling. "But I don't think we live in a perfect world."

BY AUGUST, THAT exchange with Gordon—*It will only hurt me*—remains the last communication I've received from him in nine weeks. Tweets go unacknowledged; messages, sent via both Davis and Facebook, unrequited. Then, Gordon's disappearance swiftly goes multiplatform. Comprehensively so.

Four days after that June interview with Willard, Gordon deletes his Instagram account, erasing far more than the three new photos of him posing with his boyfriend. And while Gordon still tweets—July 29: "Train like an animal, play like a beast. Can't wait for this upcoming season at Seton Hall"—he soon switches his Twitter account to private and takes down the rainbow-colored #BETRUE logo. When I call Gordon's cellphone, an automated voice interrupts to proclaim that the number dialed is not in service anymore.

Gordon, Davis says, changed his number because he was getting calls from people he didn't know. But it's not just Gordon who vanishes. Through email and in person, Seton Hall's Chen had agreed to arrange an interview with Shaheen Holloway, an assistant coach involved in Gordon's recruitment. But after my trip to campus, I never hear from Holloway or, for that matter, Chen. My follow-up emails about Gordon to Seton Hall go ignored. The idea for that photo shoot seems like a million years ago.

And so, on a sunny mid-August afternoon in Plainfield, worried about what has happened to Gordon, all I can do is knock on the screen door of the house with white siding and a wooden cavity where a doorbell once might have been. The asphalt driveway, culminating in a basketball hoop on the left side of the building, is empty. Overhead, a small air conditioner softly rattles a second-floor window frame.

When no one comes to the door, I place a handwritten letter inside the mounted metal mailbox, asking Derrick to please call or text or email. And then I walk away.

IT IS EXTRAORDINARILY difficult to blame Gordon for his silence. If he doesn't make an NBA roster, it will surely be because he's a marginal prospect with outsized ambitions. But if those ambitions mean everything to him, and if those ambitions require him to



“PEOPLE WERE SAYING, ‘FANS ARE GOING TO HECKLE HIM.’ BUT I WENT TO LSU, TO BYU, TO ST. BONAVENTURE. NOBODY SAID ANYTHING AT ALL.”

DERRICK GORDON, ABOVE, BEING HUGGED BY UMASS TEAMMATE CADY LALLANE AFTER HITTING A GAME-WINNING SHOT IN OVERTIME AGAINST PROVIDENCE

somehow blend in at his new school, and if they are the key to not only getting off his parents' couch but also getting his family off that block entirely, then risk aversion makes sense. It becomes easy to feel a fear that many of us, in our eager desensitization to coming-out stories, presume obsolete.

Consider the trajectory of Gordon's closest analogue, Michael Sam, a far

more accomplished college player. The defensive end went from the last round of the 2014 NFL draft to the Cowboys practice squad to the Canadian Football League this past spring to out of the sport altogether. Not unlike Gordon, Sam was an increasingly public figure who seemed to relish the concept of visibility as activism. Then, for one reason or another, he disappeared.

There might one day be a young, elite athlete in a major American sport who has so much leverage over his future that he can be as honest and unswerving out as he wants. But for

now, we are left with imperfect, self-contradicting case studies to decode. We are left with a screen door in Plainfield that will not open.

Until, to my surprise, it randomly does. I have one foot in the dirt parking lot across the street from Gordon's house when I look back at the porch and notice a woman standing in the doorway, unfolding my letter. After I wave and approach, she introduces herself as Sandra, Derrick's mom, and asks me to hold on for a second while shutting the door. When it opens again, she politely extends her cellphone across the transom.

Derrick, at long last, on the line.

Sandra—who will kindly decline to be interviewed—watches through the screen as I ask her son what changed for him after our interview. Gordon's voice, once bursting with defiance, is so monotonous in my ear as to sound unfamiliar. “I have a year left to make an impact, and I don't want anything coming back at me as far as me being openly gay,” he tells me, with all the enthusiasm of a printed talking point. “I came out a year ago, so I want this to be about basketball. This will not add value to my basketball career.”

I ask what prompted him to delete his Instagram account. “I took it down just to take it down,” he replies.

I ask if anyone—coaches, family, advisers—urged him after our interview not to be so open about certain aspects of himself. “No,” Gordon says. “That was my fault.” And then, as if to pre-empt further inquiry, he offers an unforgettable bit of retrospective self-appraisal: “I was just babbling to you.”

Standing on that porch, handing the phone back to Sandra, I cannot help but remember a 23-year-old's searing monologue about the urgent reasons society still needs stories about uncloseted athletes in 2015. Months earlier, before we parted ways at TGI Fridays, such passion had moved me to tell Gordon, in awe, that the first, and only, openly gay man in Division I basketball seemed to love the visibility he had gained.

“Who wouldn't?” he replied then, smiling brightly. “Who wouldn't?” ■



BEING OUT



GUS KENWORTHY'S NEXT BOLD MOVE



He medaled at the Olympics, saved the "Sochi strays" and became a face of the X Games. Now the world's best freeskier is ready for his biggest jump yet—coming out.

BY ALYSSA ROENIGK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER HAPAK

ADVISORY:
THIS STORY
CONTAINS
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GUS KENWORTHY STARTED COMING OUT TO HIS FAMILY AND CLOSEST FRIENDS NEARLY TWO YEARS AGO.

His mom said she knew. His brother said he was proud. His best friend voiced unrelenting support. And if Gus Kenworthy were an average 24-year-old, the announcement—the story—might have ended there. But Gus Kenworthy is not an average 24-year-old. He is the top freeskiier on the planet, an Olympic medalist, a face of the X Games. He is an elite athlete competing in the world of action sports, where sponsors—and income—are inextricably linked to image. In other words, he is an athlete with a lot to lose. But Gus Kenworthy is ready to tell that world, his sport, his truth. And so, as we sit down together in Los Angeles in

September, he begins the only way he knows how: “I guess I should start by saying, ‘I’m gay.’”

ONE MONTH AFTER the debut of ski slopestyle at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Kenworthy, armed with a silver medal, is returning home to Telluride, Colorado. There’s a parade being held in his honor, the town’s first Winter Olympian. A crush of kids waving miniature flags printed with Kenworthy’s image march below a “Go Gus!” banner that stretches across the town’s main drag. There’s a band and fireworks. Mayor Stu Fraser proclaims a stretch of





San Juan Avenue “Gus’s Way.”

As only the third trio in American history to sweep a Winter Olympics event, Kenworthy and fellow medalists Joss Christensen and Nick Goepper are media darlings. They were featured on the *Today* show, *Good Day New York* and a box of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes. David Letterman gave them a standing ovation. But the charismatic star in the center attracted the most attention. Kenworthy not only medaled in Russia, he also saved the Sochi strays, five dogs that had been living outside an Olympic media center. A photo he posted cuddling the pups went viral, and his social media numbers soared. He was linked to ice-skater Gracie Gold and pop sensation Miley Cyrus. *People* magazine and *US Weekly* put him on their covers. He was a *Jeopardy* answer.

Now, back home in Telluride, mountains looming as the backdrop, Kenworthy addresses his fans. “This is incredibly overwhelming,” he says, words shaky, face red from the cold. “This whole crowd here is my family.”

As his short speech comes to a close to raucous applause, Kenworthy continues through the crowd, flashing uneasy grins for the camera-holding masses, wishing he could hide from view. They see a hometown hero, Kenworthy sees a liar and a coward. If they knew he was gay, would these kids idolize him as much? Would his sponsors continue to pay him? Would his friends stop using “gay” as a descriptor for all things that suck?

The answer, Kenworthy is convinced, is no. They’d all turn away, and all he’d be left with is a heavy piece of silver. He is so convinced of this that, in his darkest moments, one of America’s newest and most beloved Olympians has contemplated taking his own life.

Instead, in the months after Sochi, Kenworthy makes a deal with himself, to settle two debts: Become the world’s best freeskiier, and then, and only then, tell

everyone the truth.

"I never got to be proud of what I did in Sochi because I felt so horrible about what I didn't do," Kenworthy says. "I didn't want to come out as the silver medalist from Sochi. I wanted to come out as the best freeskier in the world."

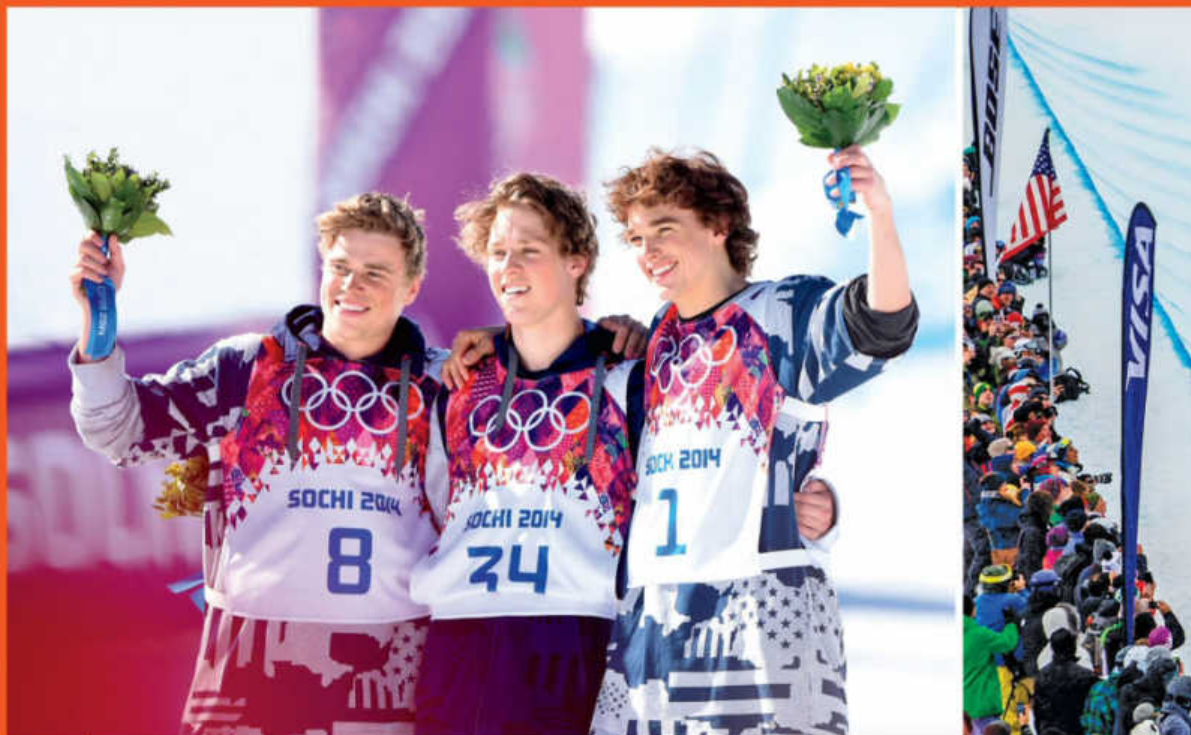
KENWORTHY HAS ALWAYS been fiercely competitive. Growing up in Telluride with two older brothers, Hugh and Nick, he developed a passion for skiing. As a child, when he'd learn a new skill, he'd pepper his ski coach with the same two questions: "He would ask, 'Did I do that better than Nick? Better than Hugh?'" remembers his mom, Pip. But his coach's verbal reassurance wasn't enough. "He'd get the coach to write on a piece of paper, 'Gus did a 360 better than Nick,'" his mom says. "He wanted to be better than his brothers, better than everyone." Then, just for good measure, he'd bring the notes home and hang them on the fridge.

Kenworthy and his friends were known to stay at the terrain park practicing tricks after the lifts were closed, hiking the jumps for hours. When staff would ask them to leave, Kenworthy would go home and build jumps in his backyard instead. "I always felt like I had something to prove, like I had to work twice as hard to make sure I got it," he says. "I knew I didn't want to be a good skier. I wanted to be the best."

For him, being the best was a form of atonement. Kenworthy knew he was gay as early as 5 years old and felt different from other boys. With his brothers, he shared a love for skiing and hockey, but their similarities seemed to end there. "I was insecure and ashamed," he says. "Unless you're gay, being gay has never been looked at as being cool. And I wanted to be cool."

Even early on as a competitor, Kenworthy earned a reputation for "guinea-pigging"—trying new jumps and tricks before anyone else. It was a huge source of pride for him and a surefire way to earn the respect of his peers in the action sports world, where athletes are constantly weighing the risk against the

Kenworthy (above left) feels most free when competing, as in Sochi and in the halfpipe at Park City (middle).



reward. "I was pretty adventurous and daring," Kenworthy says. "And I had rubber bones." One particularly impressive YouTube video of his skills, posted online when he was 16, landed him his first sponsors. He turned pro later that year.

Almost immediately, Kenworthy says, he felt pressure to fit in. Friends weren't an issue; he was good-looking and likable, the kind of guy who gets along with everyone. But girls were an inescapable part of the role. "In skiing, there's such an alpha male thing about pulling the hottest chicks," Kenworthy says. "I know hooking up with hot girls doesn't sound like the worst thing in the world. But I literally would sleep with a girl and then cry about it afterward. I'm like, 'What am I doing? I don't know what I'm doing.'"

On the mountain, Kenworthy was unstoppable. At 15, he competed in the USASA Nationals and took first place in superpipe and third in slopestyle. But 2010 was his breakout year—he won both slopestyle and superpipe at the Aspen/Snowmass Open. Still, there was one competition that was in his head, one that loomed larger to him than the rest—

the X Games. "More than I've wanted anything," Kenworthy says, "I've wanted to do well at the X Games."

Kenworthy grew up watching the X Games, always noticing how the announcers riffed about his favorite skiers as the camera focused on their families and girlfriends. "It was such a window into who they were," he says. So when he competed there for the first time, at 19, the year after that breakout event, it probably shouldn't have come as a surprise when an ESPN TV producer asked if his girlfriend would be in attendance. And yet, it caught him completely off guard. "No, no girlfriend," Kenworthy replied, his stomach twisting into knots. The question left him nervous, feeling guilty, his focus completely shot. It was no way to drop into a slopestyle course or an icy, 22-foot-tall halfpipe. "X Games has been the death of me," Kenworthy says. "I've won every contest on tour and medaled at the Olympics, and I've never won a medal in Aspen."

That refrain—"No, no girlfriend"—is something Kenworthy wound up repeating year after year, even when he



had a boyfriend standing in the crowd, cheering him on. The X Games are a testosterone-fueled, obligation-filled weekend, which can make it difficult to focus, but it's that one question that Kenworthy believes affects him most deeply and throws him off his game. "Part of [the stress] is the fact that I've never had a TV boyfriend," he says. "That's actually something I want so bad—a TV boyfriend."

"It's actually become stressful for me to be around him at contests because he's so stressed out," says Bobby Brown, Kenworthy's best friend and four-time X Games gold medalist. "He will get onto the chairlift at X Games and throw up, he's so nervous. I've never seen anyone react that way, and it's been getting worse and worse."

FOR ALL OF its emphasis on being alternative, the action sports world doesn't reward nonconformity. "They say it's a community of individuals and everyone is doing their own thing and it's not a team sport, so you get to be yourself," Kenworthy says. "But you don't, really." Unlike team sports,

athletes never leave the locker room. They turn pro as children and become immediately indoctrinated by the culture. "Between the contests and the [video] shoots, everyone's always skiing and training together," Kenworthy says. "But it is the same, it's totally like that: Be creative, be yourself, be all this stuff, but also literally just be everybody else."

Kenworthy has watched carefully these past few years as the world around him has grown more accepting. Gay marriage is legal now, attitudes are changing. He was excited this spring when Caitlyn Jenner came out. He believes that people are more aware.

"But then at the same time," he says, "people are literally oblivious."

For him, there have existed day-to-day reminders. Take, for instance, the former sponsor who made a crude anti-gay remark about why Kenworthy was once late to a competition. Take his physical therapist, who once told Kenworthy that he couldn't even imagine *talking* to a gay guy all night. ("I thought, 'You've talked to a gay guy for two hours a day, four days a week for seven months.'")

Take the constant drumbeat of living in a culture that uses the words "gay" and "fag" as commonly as "stoked." A daily check of social media for Kenworthy means encountering posts written by friends or peers who, without knowing it, reveal what they think about his sexuality. Today, it might be a Facebook rant or an Instagram post from a pro snowboarder who's annoyed that "skier fags" have infiltrated another contest or complaining that a shoddy halfpipe is "gay." Tomorrow, it might be a tweet written by an athlete he admires who is "sickened" by same-sex marriage.

"There's a lot of testosterone in our sport, and those derogatory words get thrown around like crazy," says Canadian freeskiier Justin Dorey. "A lot of people don't think twice about it because those words don't mean anything to them."

Action sports have also always been about promoting a lifestyle. Though they might appear decidedly counterculture—the baggy clothes, the music, the long hair—the athletes live in uniform. But with the core snow industry's economy tanking (Nike eliminated snowboarding and skiing from its action sports program, Burton cut riders, Quiksilver filed for bankruptcy) and new corporate influence and sponsors flowing in, the athletes have less and less control deciding what that lifestyle is, if they ever had control in the first place. Sponsors equal an athlete's livelihood. A top athlete like Kenworthy, who is sponsored by Nike, Atomic, GoPro and Monster, takes in around 80 percent of his \$500,000 to \$1 million a year from sponsorships, which are based as much on image as they are contest wins.

With legitimate income on the table, Kenworthy can't help but be worried about how all of this will affect his livelihood.

“EVERYONE DRIVES THE SAME TYPE OF CAR AND LISTENS TO THE SAME MUSIC. THE INDUSTRY ISN’T THE MOST EMBRACING OF SOMEONE WHO’S DIFFERENT.”

GUS KENWORTHY

“Everyone wears a Red Bull or Monster or Rockstar cap, a T-shirt and jeans and skate shoes,” Kenworthy says. “Everyone drives the same type of car and listens to the same kind of music. The industry isn’t the most embracing of someone who’s different. I’m nervous about that.”

“It’s tough when you have people telling you who to be and how to act in order to keep your job,” Brown says. “But I’ve seen that the people who flourish stick to their guns and are themselves. Those are the people who live the happiest lives and have the most longevity in action sports. But that’s easier said than done.”

When Kenworthy came out to Dorey in January, Dorey’s response was instant—it was time for Kenworthy to share his full self with the world—their world. “Our sport needs this,” he told him. “Action sports needs this. More people than you think will be supportive.”

Or so they hope.

“I don’t want to make skiing less cool,” Kenworthy says. “I hear the snowboarders call us ‘skier fags.’ And it’s frustrating because I’m literally going to live up to that stereotype.”

IN JANUARY, KENWORTHY arrived at the X Games in Aspen the favorite of the event. Less than a year removed from his Sochi success, he was featured in broadcasts and promotional materials, his face plastered throughout the site. He was expected to medal in slopestyle, superpipe and big air; no other skier or snowboarder even qualified for three events.

He failed to medal in any.

The next day, he called his father and told him he was quitting. He’d skied his last run.

In Kenworthy’s mind, he was a failure. A few months before the Aspen event, his relationship with his boyfriend—who was largely responsible for bringing the stray dogs home from Sochi—had ended. Two had died—one in Russia, one shortly

after arriving in the U.S. to live—and his boyfriend took the dogs with him. Kenworthy felt surrounded by loss. He’d made a promise to himself about being the best, and he was falling short. If he quit now, he thought, he could walk away quietly, come out to a few friends, fall in love again and attempt to find peace.

“In a state like he was in, I told him not to make decisions,” says Gus’ father, Peter. “I said, ‘Go home, sleep on it and worst case, give yourself another year.’”

His agent, Michael Spencer, echoed the sentiment. “I told him, ‘Don’t quit after one bad event. Spend a season doing the runs you want to do, take away all expectations and see where the cards fall.’”

Kenworthy took their advice to heart and decided to go forward with his season. Ten days after the X Games, he was back at it, this time with renewed purpose. At the Mammoth Mountain Grand Prix, Kenworthy took third in halfpipe. At the Shaun White Air + Style event at the Rose Bowl two weeks later, he won the inaugural ski big air event. But those wins were minor compared with what came next: At the February event in Park City, already in possession of the highest score of the day, Kenworthy dropped into the halfpipe for his second run and debuted a new trick—a double cork 1260. If he added it to his run, he

could make history. On his first hit, he stomped a massive left double cork safety grab 1260 and then landed three other double corks. It was the first contest run to ever include four different double corks. It’s widely heralded as the greatest performance in ski halfpipe history.

With that win, Kenworthy finished the season No. 1, the Association of Freeskiing Professionals overall champ for the fifth year in a row. Few would argue that Kenworthy’s 2014-15 season wasn’t one of the best, if not *the* best, of all time.

“About five years ago, we all started picking slopestyle, halfpipe or big air and focusing 100 percent of our time on one event,” Dorey says. “Gus is the only athlete who is talented and driven enough to win in all three disciplines. And he did that last year. He’s the best contest freeskiier in the world. He has the head on his shoulders to be the icon.”

Despite an injury soon after, at the World Cup contest in France, Kenworthy knew he’d reached his goal of being the best in the world. He spent the rest of the summer at his house in Denver recovering physically from a torn MCL and lateral meniscus and underwent microfracture surgery to repair a break in his femur. And for the rest of the summer, he started to heal emotionally, allowing his mind to wander to this coming January, to the X Games. He thought about how it would feel to compete without the burden of protecting his secret and what it would be like to one day stand in the start gate, look up at the big screen and see “Gus Kenworthy’s boyfriend” cheering him on from the bottom of the course. After 24 years, the reward had become greater than the risk. He knew it was time.

“I’m sure there have been gay action sports athletes in the past,” Dorey says. “I’m sure there are now. But Gus being the first to step up, come out and take the heat, it’s badass. Once again, he’s guinea-pigging it for everyone else.”

Kenworthy, no surprise, approaches it like he approaches everything else—as an athlete. “I want to be the guy who comes out, wins s--- and is like, I’m taking names.” ■



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BEING OUT

THE DEFINITION OF AN ATHLETE

Triathlete [Chris Mosier](#) is the first known out transgender athlete to make a U.S. national team. But will he be allowed to compete for his country?

BY SAMANTHA M. SHAPIRO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENEDICT EVANS





B

Y THE TIME Chris Mosier hit the ice machine in the Ramada Inn lobby at 8:30 a.m., he'd already run 20 miles, wending through the silent streets and wooded bike paths of Marquette, Michigan, and along the shoreline of Lake Superior.

As a recently qualified member of the U.S. national triathlon team—his event is the sprint duathlon, a run-cycle-run race—Mosier is training for his first world championship in Spain next June. Ice baths are part of the 35-year-old's regimen, so Mosier holds the clear, flimsy bag from his room's trash can under the machine, trying to collect enough to fill his tub in a few trips from the eighth floor.

Back in his room, Mosier takes off his running shirt, drapes his head and muscled shoulders with a hotel towel and winces as he

steps into the ice bath. He sits down with a violent exhale and a shudder. "Oooh, it's pretty bad," he moans. He exhales again, closes his eyes and squeezes his hands.

Mosier is slight and spry, with a 1,000-watt smile. He instructs thousands of athletes online and coaches more than 100 in person. He appears, even out of their earshot, genuinely thrilled each time any of them hit their goals. "Pumped" is a word he frequently uses to describe his emotional state.

But up close, after a two-and-a-half-hour run on a bad night's sleep, Mosier looks a bit battle worn. His iced skin is salmon red and chapped; there's no fat on his body, no sign of indulgence, just gnarls of muscle. A long white scar snakes across his collarbone from when he got hit from

behind while biking in 2013. And there are two purple and white scars on his chest from a surgery he had as part of the transition to physically becoming a man.

When room service arrives with eggs, pancakes, hash browns and orange juice, he lifts himself out of the bath. Two hours later, he's dressed in a royal blue tailored suit with a pin at the lapel showing the American flag, with the Olympic rings beneath. Mosier, the first known out transgender athlete to qualify for any U.S. national team, is trying to be a trailblazer in the way Jackie Robinson was a trailblazer: busting through rules that still seek to exclude people like him, winning the right to compete at his sport's highest level. He wants to be seen, to force the world to make a space that isn't

"THERE WAS AN ASSUMPTION THAT I'D MOVE OVER AND NOT DO VERY WELL. SO NO ONE PAID ATTENTION TO ME, WHICH WAS FINE AND GREAT."

CHRIS MOSIER

there. But due to the muddled policies of the international sports world, it's not clear whether Mosier will get the chance. And the way his case is handled by athletic governing bodies could set a precedent that ripples through the sports world.

On this September morning, he's off to Northern Michigan University, his alma mater, invited to speak at a diversity event. It will be his first visit to campus since he graduated 12 years ago. Mosier's day job is as assistant director of residential life at Marymount Manhattan College, but he spends the rest of his waking hours on training, coaching and advocacy. He is executive director of a national LGBTQ student-athlete network, GO! Athletes, which advocates for and mentors LGBTQ athletes; the

night before, he'd led a conference call with former NBA player Jason Collins from his hotel room. On his site, transathlete.com, Mosier compiles a list of sports organizations' policies for allowing transgender athletes to compete. He also consults on how to make organizations more trans inclusive.

Mosier's path has taken him many places—he was invited to the White House in 2011—but he wasn't sure he'd ever come back to NMU. He lived in college as an androgynous and confused woman, and some of his memories of harassment and isolation are painful.

As he enters University Center, a 1960s-era brick building with beige cinder-block halls, he feels nauseated and light-headed from his run. He slams three glasses of lemonade and rests in an armchair before heading into the conference. Mosier is devoted to being out and to being an advocate, but he's at least a bit conflicted about all that comes with that. Private by nature, he takes umbrage at the wide range of questions that get thrown at trans people.

The conference room is set up with hundreds of chairs, but only about 30 people have gathered to hear the current speaker. It's hard to tell whether anyone will show up for Mosier's talk, but when the speaker concludes, more than

100 students and teachers have poured in. Mosier's whole energy changes when he takes to the podium. His talk is a funny, heartfelt discussion of his transition. He tells the audience that he used to perform as NMU's Wildcat Willie mascot. When people photographed Willie, Mosier always smiled inside the yellow furry head. "I smiled biggest for photos when no one could see me," he says. "I spent a lot of time here trying to make myself invisible."

After Mosier's speech, a line forms. "I'm Kayleh and this is Nikki, and we just want to say you are awesome. Can we take a selfie with you?"

An administrator quietly tells Mosier, "It's good you were here, good to see you. We are very proud of you." Mosier gently chides him, "You guys need to get some gender-blind dorms."

Alex Clark, a 24-year-old English and history major with a scraggly beard, wants to know whether Mosier has any idea how Clark can keep playing on his beloved women's rugby team now that he has transitioned. "Nah, man, you know the NCAA says you take one shot, you get disqualified," Mosier says of testosterone, adding, "even though we know that one dose doesn't do anything."

Mosier asks whether Clark has considered the men's team. "They all know me from before I transitioned, when

Early-morning training is standard for Mosier, who is typically out before the sun is up.

BEING OUT

I was appearing more feminine,” Clark says, “and they’re so freaking homophobic.” Mosier is sympathetic: “I know, it’s crazy! They wear those short shorts! But yeah, it sucks. There’s still rec league.”

Like Clark, Mosier faces uncertainty over whether he’ll be able to compete in his sport. The International Triathlon Union, which runs the world championship, does not publicly list a policy on transgender athletes, and Mosier has yet to receive an answer to his request for clarification. He is concerned that the ITU will follow the International Olympic Committee’s guidelines, a possibility Mosier describes as the “worst-case scenario.” He says that the IOC criteria are discriminatory and “not relevant to athletic performance”—and that they could bar him from competition.

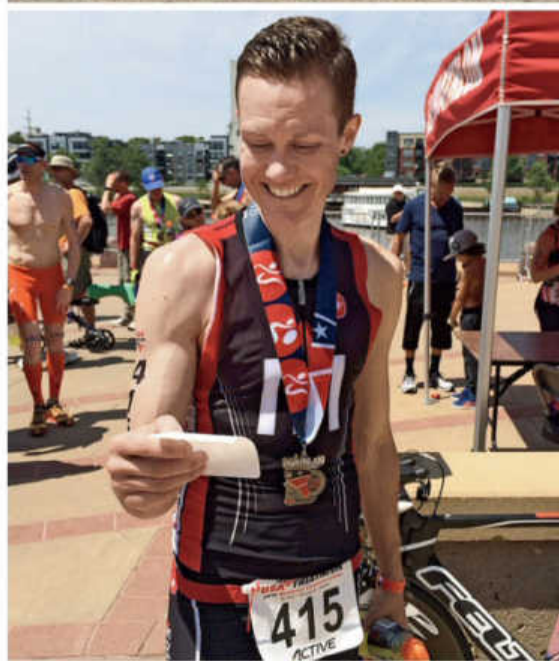
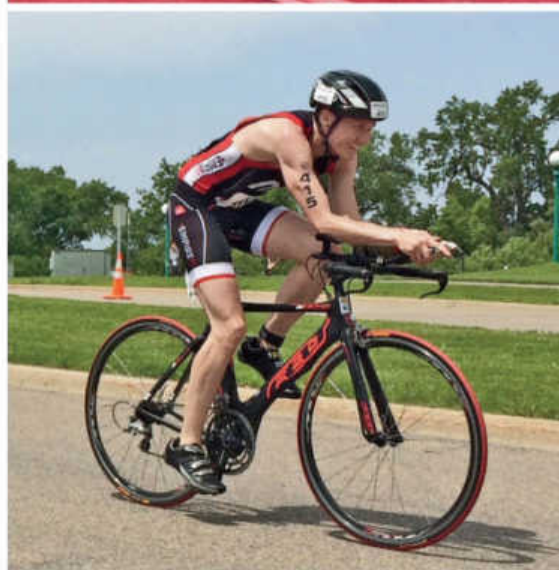
FOR A LONG time, “athlete” was the only label that fit Mosier comfortably. When he was 8, growing up in a Chicago suburb, he started taking adult karate classes three times a week. At 10, he got his black belt and began teaching the adult class; he remembers appearing on the front page of a Chicago newspaper under the headline “The New Karate Kid.”

Mosier has always presented himself as masculine, and people frequently asked whether he was a guy or a girl. “It felt good in a way, like a confirmation of something,” Mosier says, “but what felt bad was watching my mom’s reaction of discomfort.” Mosier thought he would grow up to be a man. “I never envisioned myself in female clothes, never pictured myself getting married, having the dress, how a lot of young girls do. I always pictured myself with a flat chest and washboard abs.”

When he headed to college, Mosier threw himself into activities, editing the school paper, leading a coed service fraternity, hosting a radio show, playing intramural sports and performing as Wildcat Willie. “I was always moving from group to group, never getting too close. I didn’t want to have strong relationships because I was uncomfortable with myself,” Mosier says. “Everyone



On June 6, Mosier competed in the U.S. sprint duathlon national championship in Minnesota. His time of 1:02:45.48 put him in seventh place for his age group and on the national team.



else was questioning what I was, who I was, but I never put the time into figuring that out. I didn’t identify with female, but I didn’t have the language to understand what that was for me.”

Mosier knew of no trans people at NMU. “My experience with trans people was Jerry Springer and Maury Povich or men in dresses for comedy. None of that was positive, and it was mostly male to female.”

Mosier dated men until his senior year, when he met Zhen Heinemann, who is now his wife. After graduation, he moved to LA, Chicago and then, at age 25, New York City. In 2008, at 28, he returned to Chicago to run his first marathon. Once he completed that goal, he thought, “What’s next?” So he bought a bike, and he taught himself to swim from books and videos.

Within a year, he ran his first triathlon, winning the first-timer’s bracket for women at a race on Staten Island.

At the same time that Mosier was getting more serious about his athletic career, his issues around gender identity were coming to a head. After college, Mosier thought “maybe I can identify as androgynous and exist in this body and ask people not to use pronouns with me, or maybe I can be OK with people calling me *he* 40 percent of the time.”

But living in an in-between place didn’t work. “Every time people would call me *she* or ask ‘What are you?’ my power meter would go down,” Mosier says. “At the end of the day, I was just broken.”

Heinemann insisted that Mosier seek therapy. In counseling, he talked about how a transition would affect his family and work, but he kept coming back to sports. “Playing sports and being competitive was so important to me,” he says. “If I transition, will I be competitive as a

man? Will I not be allowed to compete because of my presentation? What if I don't pass as male?"

He eventually decided it was more important to be comfortable in the rest of his life, regardless of what happened with sports. By the time Mosier enrolled in NYU's graduate program for higher education in January 2010, he'd begun transitioning and entered as a man. He changed his gender designation on documents and trained with the men's cycling team. In mid-2010, he started testosterone, and by year's end, he was competing as a man. He also sent an email to all his Marymount colleagues announcing his transition.

Mosier thought a lot about whether to be out when he transitioned or to live his life "just as a guy"—to be known as just an athlete instead of as a transgender athlete.

But he says he felt obligated to come out based on his experience growing up. "I want to be the person I needed 15 years ago," Mosier says. "In terms of me saying, 'This is my identity; where do I fit in? What's your organization's name-change policy? Are there gender-neutral locker rooms?' I am setting up systems in place so other people can navigate with greater ease because I have already done it."

During his transition, Mosier blogged on a website for trans men called Original Plumbing on his fears about passing, competing in body-conscious spandex and changing in group tents during triathlons. Now, he says, most of these concerns no longer feel like an issue. The biggest surprise, Mosier says, was that when he started competing as a man, "no one cared. That's part of the super interesting thing—no one gave me a hard time."

Female transgender athletes, such as MMA fighter Fallon Fox, are often subject to harassment and threatened with exclusion. One reason Mosier thinks he didn't get pushback is that it was widely believed that someone who transitioned from female could not be competitive against men. "There was an assumption that I would move over and not do very well, so no one paid attention to me, which was fine and great," Mosier says. But he is in fact

competitive with other men. Mosier regularly places in the top 10 percent of his age group.

As part of his transition, he began testosterone therapy at about the same time he upped his training. Although the hormone has helped him build muscle faster and easier, he says, "It's hard to say how much of my performance is me waking up at 5 a.m. and training my ass off and how much is related to testosterone."

His longtime teammate and co-coach from the Empire Triathlon Club, Alison Kreideweis, says, "I don't think it's about advantage or disadvantage. It's really just that guy tries harder than everyone else."

ON A TRAINING ride in 2010, before Mosier was competing against men, a teammate suggested that he compete in the women's duathlon national championship to see





CELEBRATING THE TRADITIONS THAT INSPIRE SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE.



While the origin of Mississippi State's cowbell tradition is a little unclear, the most popular legend holds that it originated during a rivalry game after a cow wandered onto the playing field. Mississippi State easily won the game, and students were quick to credit the victory to the cow, deeming it a good luck charm. It's said that students would bring cows to football games for a while after the victory over their in-state rival, but eventually decided to leave the livestock at home, instead bringing the animals' neckwear to games.

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whether he could qualify for Team USA. The idea stuck. "Every time I passed the same point on the road where he mentioned that—it was next to a wood bus shelter in a small town near Nyack—I could hear him saying that to me," he says.

Mosier never attempted to qualify for the national team in the women's division, but by 2014, he felt he could qualify for Team USA as a man. Mosier had already contacted the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency to ensure he would be in compliance with its requirements for transgender athletes. Mosier documented his hormone levels for the USADA to verify that they were within normal male range and subjected himself to random testing. He set out to enroll in the national championship race in the 30-34 bracket (triathlons are grouped by age), scheduled for July in St. Paul, Minnesota.

"Age-group athletes can get away with participating without going through those official steps, but I want to make sure everything is in order so there will never be a case where I win something and people contest it," he says.

But the process of making the doctor's appointments and getting the test results he'd need to obtain a therapeutic use exemption for testosterone took longer than expected, and then the USADA needed 21 days to reach a decision. Mosier didn't find out until the Friday before the race that he was eligible to compete—too late for him to make it to Minnesota. "I was a little heartbroken," he says.

So Mosier marked the 2015 race on his calendar and pegged all his training goals to making the top 18, which was the cutoff to qualify for the national team. "I really structured my season around the one race. That was my only goal for this year."

In April, two months before the race, Mosier was surprised to learn that USA Triathlon had changed the qualification standards for the world championship: Only the top eight finishers in his age bracket, now 35-39, would qualify for Team USA.

Mosier is a nervous racer, and for a month or two all he thought about was making the national team. "Every time I rode my bike to commute or run errands, I would think about the championship and envision myself racing," he says. "I raced that race 400 times before I actually got to the starting line."

Finally, this past June, Mosier and his wife drove nearly 1,200 miles to Minnesota for the championship. Race day dawned sunny and clear, and by the time Mosier reached the starting line, a knee injury that had been bothering him for months magically eased. Two-thirds through the race, as he pulled into the transition area between the cycling leg and the second run, he surveyed the number of bikes in ahead of him and figured he was in the running to nab one of the final spots. But he couldn't be sure. After crossing the finish line, he made his way to the timing table to grab the piece of paper with his finish results. Without so much as peeking at it, he walked away from everyone else to be by himself. Finally, he peered down: It said he placed seventh. He was a member of Team USA. Mosier couldn't stop smiling and looking at the number.

AS SOON AS Mosier qualified for Team USA, he reached out to the ITU to find out what it would require to clear him to compete in the world championship, but he never received a definitive answer.

Across sports organizations, policies on transgender athletes are wildly inconsistent. On the high school level, some states permit students to compete as whatever gender they identify with, some require athletes to change their birth certificate and some have no policy at all. A state legislator in South Dakota recently introduced a measure that would require transgender high school athletes to submit to a “visual inspection.” The NCAA came out with a policy on transgender athletes in 2011 that requires a year of hormone therapy but not any surgery.

Many sports organizations default to the IOC’s guidelines on transgender athletes. The group has a long and checkered history on issues of gender. In the mid-1960s, IOC officials required women to appear naked and submit to gynecological exams to prove that they were really women. Even today, the IOC tests naturally occurring hormone levels in some female athletes. If a woman’s body naturally has a high level of circulating testosterone—something that is highly variable and that, unlike synthetic testosterone, has never been shown to confer an athletic advantage—she can be disqualified from competition.

In 2004, the IOC, ahead of many institutions, published guidelines on what criteria transgender athletes should meet in order to compete. In a rhetorical flourish, these were officially dubbed the “Stockholm consensus on sex reassignment in sports.” Among other things, the Stockholm Consensus calls for any transgender athlete to have had a gonadectomy and reconstructive genital surgery two years before competing. Genital reconstructive surgery is expensive, rarely covered by insurance and not desired by a significant portion of transgender people. Transgender advocates say requiring the surgery is unfair because the operation doesn’t affect athletic ability in any way.

“Some people are comfortable with their bodies and they don’t want to do that,” Mosier says. “Their ability to compete as athletes shouldn’t be contingent on adding or removing body parts.” (According to a statement from an IOC representative, “The IOC has always taken great care that such sensitive issues are dealt with by broad consensus using the latest scientific knowledge and research in that area.”)

Technically, the IOC doesn’t enforce the Stockholm Consensus itself but offers its guidelines to all the world’s international sports federations, from track and field to swimming to soccer. It’s up to those groups to enforce the guidelines, if they so choose, an IOC representative explained to ESPN in an email. Many adopt the IOC’s position—because it was the first and because it carries the imprimatur of the Olympics.

The effect is that, although the IOC drafted the rules, it kicks the can on enforcement to groups such as the ITU.

When contacted to clarify the ITU’s policy on transgender athletes, a representative emailed that the group does go by IOC policy: Transgender athletes must be two years post-surgery before competing.

But the ITU also said that, similar to the IOC, it does not actually enforce the guidelines itself. Instead, it relies on the national federations, such as USA Triathlon, to ensure that all IOC requirements are met when they enter their athletes into international competition. So the ITU kicks the can down another level.



CELEBRATING THE TRADITIONS THAT INSPIRE SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE.



Roll Tide. If you’re an Alabama fan, you live by this rally cry. If you’re a fan of another big football school that also happens to be in the state of Alabama, you’ve probably heard it one too many times. But where did it come from?

Alabama was first referred to as the “Crimson Tide” by a sports editor in 1907 in describing an Alabama game against a hated in-state rival. The game was played on a field full of red mud, which made Alabama’s white jerseys look more like crimson. Alabama shocked everyone by playing well enough to hold a heavily favored foe to a 6-6 tie. Thus earning the “Crimson Tide” name. People said that Alabama running on the field looked like the tide rolling in... hence the “roll tide” rally cry.

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BEING OUT

For its part, USAT also says that it follows IOC guidelines—a representative for the group told ESPN that it applies them to all 4,400 events it sponsors in America. In theory, that would have barred Mosier from competing and ever making Team USA. But when asked how USAT actually goes about enforcing its policy, a representative said the group allows people to compete in the gender that is on their driver's license. In many states, it's possible to change the gender on your driver's license without surgery. In other words, USAT says it requires transgender athletes to have had genital surgery but so far hasn't enforced that policy.

That would seem in conflict with the ITU's requirement to follow IOC guidelines. But according to an email from the ITU representative, that's OK: "If USA Triathlon uses the driver's license as an indicator of the legal recognition of an athlete's assigned sex as conferred by appropriate official authorities, then that is accepted by ITU."

This bizarre chain of policies and non-policies would seem to allow Mosier to compete in Spain, albeit technically in breach of rules. The problem, as Helen Carroll, the sports project director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights, points out, is that whether the policy is enforced could change at any minute.

Carroll isn't even sure all these bodies realize how circular and convoluted their rules are. "They are not concerned about transgender men participating in international sports," Carroll says, "so they don't even realize that what they are saying does not match up."

In November, the IOC will revisit the Stockholm Consensus and, according to a representative, update its guidelines "based on the latest scientific evidence."

Nobody knows exactly what the IOC will do. But Carroll says the current IOC policy barely even mentions male transgender athletes in the first place. "The IOC is very concerned about a woman athlete having a penis," Carroll says. "Officials in men's sports don't believe a person born a female could ever



"I WANT TO BE THE PERSON I NEEDED 15 YEARS AGO."

CHRIS MOSIER

be talented enough to be super competitive as a transgender man."

Chris Mosier, she hopes, could change people's minds. "I think Chris is going to blow them out of the water."

Sports bureaucrats might still be trying to figure out how transgender athletes fit in, but in a way, Mosier has already answered the question.

One morning in September, he woke up at 4:45 a.m. and ran three miles to a pedestrian bridge connecting upper Manhattan to Randall's Island. There, he fell in with a group of about 40 other members of the November Project, a hyperenergized workout group.

Through a drizzle, they ran back and forth across the bridge and blasted out burpees, lunges and squats while a boom box pumped hip-hop. As is the group's custom, members frequently hugged, high-fived and whooped. When the workout finished, Mosier hand-clapped everyone as he began his run back to his apartment. This was his tribe, people who wanted to push their bodies to the edge of what's possible and see whether the body in all its finitude and disappointments can match, however briefly, the boundlessness of the spirit inside.

He could not have been more at home. ■

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LIVING THE TRUTH



Megan Rapinoe won a World Cup for the USA this year, and she'll vie for a second Olympic gold next summer in Rio. Here, the midfielder reflects on how life has changed since she came out in 2012—and where she sees it headed next.

INTERVIEW BY JULIE FOU DY

BEING OUT

After you won the Women's World Cup in July, you went on *SportsCenter* and the one word you chose to describe yourself was "gaaaay." Why?

I thought partly it was going to be a little humorous and would sort of break the ice. And what better place to do it than *SportsCenter*? It was a bit of a double meaning because I was very happy at that time and also very gay.

Is that the most defining part of you?

No, it's a big part of me, but definitely not the defining thing. I think it's my joy in life and my charisma. I like that about myself, and I enjoy that kind of exchange I can have with people.

Would you have been able to go on *SportsCenter* three years ago when you first came out and say the same thing?

Right when I came out? I don't think so. It's been a journey and a process of becoming totally out and sort of living that truth and having it be a daily thing. I'm at the point now that I want people to know that, and I want to talk about it. We're coming so far as a society, but we still have so far to go. So until we're all the way there, I'll probably die talking about it.

When will we move beyond the coming-out stories?

Not for a long time, unfortunately. For female athletes, probably sooner than everyone else, but there's Robbie Rogers [who plays for the LA Galaxy] on the men's side—and that's it.

He's the only openly gay male U.S. soccer player.

Yeah, he is the only [active] openly gay athlete across all the major professional [team] sports in the U.S. It's incredibly sad and mind-blowing at the same time. There are plenty of sports teams that say they're very open and super accepting in the locker room. But are they really? Is it really a safe environment? Have they preset that environment to make these players feel comfortable for coming out? I don't think so because there's none out.

Is it the perception that you can't be strong and gay at the same time?

I think there's a lot of insecurity in those locker rooms, and there's also a lot of ego. That comes from fear, which comes from total lack of education and just ignorance in general. Some of it is cultural. And I just think gay men are looked at much less favorably than gay women. If you look at the overall stereotype, lesbians are sexy, and gay men are disgusting. Girl and girl is fine, and guy and guy seems to just be something completely different.

Rapinoe's next big event after Rio? A fall wedding with fiancée Sera Cahoon.

When you came out in 2012, you were sponsored by Nike. How worried were you about the reaction from the corporate world?

I wasn't really. For better or worse, I had the attitude of, If you don't like it, then get out of here. I felt very secure in it; I never felt that my sponsors—especially Nike—were going anywhere.

What was the reaction from your sponsors?

People were happy about it. I don't know if it has affected other deals or people being interested in me, but the companies I have signed with for the last four years or so have all been very accepting and welcoming and wanting to get in on that message.

How different is that from the reaction to a gay female athlete coming out before you?

With female athletes, a lot of people know they're gay—their teammates know, their coaches know. And it's almost so accepted that people don't necessarily see the need to come out—or feel the need to come out. They can just live very openly. The climate is much different. You look at the women's national team now. Abby [Wambach] is out. I'm out. Jill [Ellis], the head coach, is out. It's really cool to see some of the bigger names in soccer come out and have it be OK. There's no immediate negative backlash.

How real is a negative sponsorship backlash?

It is an issue, definitely. Even before I came out, looking at me, I've probably looked a little gay. I had short hair, and, you know, it wasn't a huge surprise to people. But some athletes have this image to uphold and may feel like sponsors won't want them if they're gay. I hope no one is sitting in a boardroom wondering which athletes to sponsor. I hope that would never go through their mind, but I think it does. So I think female athletes do feel that pressure, especially in soccer right now. There have always been a handful of players who have gotten sponsorships and have been really involved in that marketing aspect. But now it's blown up, and everywhere I look someone is getting a deal and on a



**“FOR BETTER OR WORSE,
I HAD THE ATTITUDE OF,
IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT,
THEN GET OUT OF HERE.”**

MEGAN RAPINOE

commercial and sponsored by something, which is amazing. But with that comes the pressure of looking a certain way—and companies want you to look a certain way and have a certain message. Maybe they wouldn't discriminate, but you don't know that for sure if you're a player and unsure whether to come out.

That's a real fear still?

I think it is. [Otherwise] why wouldn't more people come out, because it's so accepted in women's sports in general across the board? I think it's very accepted sort of internally in women's sports. So why aren't more athletes out?

Compare the reality of life after you came out with the perception you had going into this.

It's pretty normal in a sense, but I still get

people coming up to me and being so thankful that I came out. And that's just an affirmation every day for coming out. It was the best thing I've ever done. It's so cool to have that impact on people and be doing something really important with this platform. We're really lucky to have the platform to be able to reach a broad spectrum of people. And it's not just about the people who are gay. It's about everyone. It's about parents with kids and breaking down those barriers. Maybe you are homophobic a little bit, but then you see me and you've always loved me and you love the way I play and your kids love me. And then you're like, "Oh, that's OK, it's fine." Once it gets a little bit more personal, it helps break down those barriers.

Just weeks after the World Cup, you got engaged to your girlfriend, Sera. How did it happen?

Sera turned 40 this year, so I'm like, "I've got to do something seriously awesome." And she followed me around all summer. I had planned this trip to Orcas Island [near Seattle] and got a cute little cabin. I'm really bad at planning—and Sera knows that. So in her mind, she was trying to figure out all the details. She was like, "OK, I know we're going to go somewhere cute and romantic because it's my birthday." And so she had this whole engagement plan. She had gotten the ring. We had a great dinner. We were in this beautiful cabin. And she just totally surprised me, got down on one knee, and cute nothings, cute nothings, and asked me to marry her. It was really sweet, very, very us.

Why "very us"?

It just felt very simple and romantic and not a ton of frills. We were both in almost similar matching flannel shirts.

What would you say to other athletes who might be nervous about coming out?

I would tell them to come out and that it's going to be OK. And whatever the worst thing that you've conjured up is, it's probably way worse than what would ever happen. I would tell people that you have people to stand next to you. You don't have to be alone in it. And it's very liberating. ■

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Taking Flight When I opened myself up to the world, I was expecting a fight in return. What I got back instead has changed the trajectory of my life.



Ever since I pressed send in September on a blog entry that shared elements of my personal life that I'd shared with only a handful of people, things haven't gone as expected. Before that click, I was a happily private person who worked in the sports world. After that click, the entirety of my life was exposed to the public.

Anyone who read that entry now knew not just that I was gay but that I had struggled with it. They knew about a shame so deep I couldn't speak of its source until I was in my 30s. They knew the moment I fell in love.

I waited for the fight. Not because I lack faith in people but because it seemed inevitable that some folk would use me as the next target for their anti-gay bias.

I didn't want a fight. That was the primary reason I wrote and rewrote and rewrote that entry before I hit send. I was deathly afraid of the defensiveness that used to arise whenever I would speak about it. I needed to take the combativeness out of the equation. It's part of the reason that, for hours after pressing send, I just drove around South Florida running any errand I could think of and preparing for battle. (Buying sneakers can have a calming effect on anyone, really.)

But after I rode around with my shield, I stepped out of my car to find no need for one. Maybe it was because I eliminated the angry from my entry. But maybe it's because the world—even the sometimes Neanderthal-like sports world—has adjusted and learned more than I knew. Whatever the reason, I've discovered that it's possible for me to continue down this hostility-free path.

But continue where? What is my next step as an openly gay sports analyst in the public eye? The truth is, I don't really know. I hope that I can be a helpful voice and take on more of an activist role in the LGBT community when my passions are inflamed.

On an everyday scale, there won't be much change. I never once thought my professional relationship with ESPN or the NBA would be affected by my personal news. It certainly doesn't hurt that the NBA seems to be the most progressive of the major sports. It's probably no coincidence that Jason Collins felt comfortable coming out while he was still playing. And if I had any doubts, the personal, supportive messages I received from several prominent members of the NBA would have relieved them.

All my personal fighting was done before I wrote that blog entry. These last several weeks have been so overwhelmingly positive and life-changing for me, I don't see a struggle for me anymore. I see an opportunity to pay it forward, because so many are still battling. Specifically, high-level athletes—their stories might not take a turn like mine. For them, there remains a lot more to lose or at least many more reasons to still be afraid.

In whatever way I can, I'd like to help the advancement of the LGBT community, but I want to center it on this amazingly affirmative, optimistic feeling that has flooded me since I revealed I was gay. I focused on the negative for far too long—so long that I believed true happiness was not possible.

Too many of the world's serious issues are driven by extremes. All the hyperbolic debates and far-fetched overreactions lead us to a place where all you hear are the screams, and any idea of progress gets lost. And for closeted gay men and women, all that yelling forces them to want to hide until all the shouting stops.

This "being out" thing is a process, and you can only figure it out as you go. But while there's no handbook for it, you can have some parameters by which you can approach it.

For me, being an activist won't be a fight. It'll be an invitation to be enlightened. A request for understanding. An appeal to consider the circumstances of others who only get to live this life once and would like to spend as little of that time as possible feeling trapped or hidden or judged.

So I'd like to hear and tell more stories like mine, hear and tell more stories entirely different from mine, take part in more reasonable discussions.

It's the only way I can envision what the next step in this process really is.

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THE ALL-NEW
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A man with a beard is running on a dirt path in a forest. He is wearing a blue jacket, black leggings, and blue and black Nike Air Zoom Pegasus 32 running shoes. The background is filled with trees and green foliage.

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